

Columbus, Ohio rally against anti-worker legislation

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About 5,000 workers demonstrated at the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus on Tuesday against a bill backed by Republican Governor John Kasich that would drastically restrict workers' legal ability to resist what are anticipated to be years of wage and benefit cutting. Senate Bill 5 (SB-5) would also directly cut into workers' pay.

Buses and caravans organized by trade unions brought workers in from throughout the state. In addition, a number of workers from Columbus, Ohio's capital and third largest city, attended the event. Several hundred protesters occupied the statehouse, modeling themselves on protests in Madison, Wisconsin. Authorities locked the doors after some 700 had entered. In response, demonstrators chanted, "This is our house, let us in!" in addition to the standard from the Madison protests, "Kill the bill!"

Another rally against the bill filled the largest lecture hall at Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio.

In contrast to Madison, where many demonstrators have been high school and college students as well as private sector workers, the protesters in Columbus were largely trade union members, among them a number of trade union officials. Organizers had anticipated a larger rally. Nonetheless, many rank-and-file and non-union workers who attended the rally have suffered from years of budget-cutting and were looking for a means of fighting back.

The bill aims to lessen hundreds of thousands of local government workers' ability to strike by allowing for their permanent replacement. It would outlaw automatic pay increases and sick day allowances for teachers and force government workers to pay at least 20 percent of their own health care premiums. In addition, for some 61,000 state workers—including

university employees—the bill would block their ability to have common representation in negotiations over wages and conditions, giving state authorities enormous and arbitrary powers over their workers.

Kasich's bill, like that proposed by his counterpart in Wisconsin, Governor Scott Walker, seeks to dramatically weaken the trade unions by putting in place measures that would make it more difficult for them to hold government workers in their ranks. As in Wisconsin, it is this element of the attack that has the union bureaucrats up in arms, and not the bill's provisions stripping workers of the right to strike or its attack on wages through the imposition of hiked contributions for health care. Yet just as in Wisconsin, workers in Ohio are being driven into struggle by far deeper grievances—jobs losses, and wage- and budget-cutting.

Vera, a clinical researcher at Ohio State University, came out to oppose Kasich's bill. She said she was not in a union, and expressed concern that media coverage of the bill had failed to take into account how it would affect nonunion workers like her.

"It's not only an assault on collective bargaining," she said. "It's also an attack on pensions and health insurance for all state workers."

When asked about demands that workers have to accept "hard choices and sacrifices," Vera quickly responded, "I'd like to see the hedge fund managers start to make hard choices and sacrifices." She rejected claims that public workers make too much money or have easy jobs. "College educated public workers make 25 percent less on average than those in the private sector," she said. "Union members make 2 percent less."

In her interview, Vera trained her fire on the Republican Party. A *World Socialist Web Site* reporter

pointed out that President Obama had implemented a wage freeze on federal government workers and was slashing spending on social programs, even after handing out trillions to the banks. “I agree with you,” she said. “I agree with a more socialist perspective.”

Vera and a friend (who preferred not to give her name) said that they were inspired to attend the Columbus rally by the events in Wisconsin as well as the Middle East, where dictatorships have been shaken and driven from power due to mass uprisings. In contrast to the Middle East, “at least we don’t have people shooting at us,” Vera offered. “Not yet,” her friend quickly added.

Service Employees International Union (SEIU) organizer Ruairi Rhodes from Cincinnati touted all the efforts of the unions in Ohio to assist the state in its budget crisis, such as accepting mandatory furlough days. “The main thing is collective bargaining,” he said, articulating the position of the trade union bureaucracy. “If we have that, in 10 or 15 years we can get back the concessions.”

Dana Belcher, a Columbus school bus driver, said he does not believe the attempt to pit private sector workers against public sector workers can succeed. “We’re neighbors with each other,” he said. “We’re in the same families.”

Joel and Eric are two Department of Natural Resources (DNR) workers and members of the OCSEA (Ohio Civil Service Employees Association) who work south of Columbus. They said that due to budget cutbacks over the past several years their agency, which is tasked with protecting the state’s forests and wildlife, has been reduced to “a skeleton crew.”

“People who say we don’t work hard don’t know anything,” said Joel, noting that their office staff had been cut in half. “Today before I came here I had to clean the toilets in our offices.”

Lisa and Deloris are two recently laid-off state workers, who did not want to identify their jobs for fear they would not be able to regain them.

Deloris said she believes SB-5 is “another step toward making this just a country of haves and have-nots.” She blamed the bill on Republicans, but when a WSWS reporter pointed out that similar measures were being put in place by Democratic governors and the Obama administration—with union backing—she said that “Democrats and Republicans are really on the

same side, they’re just fighting over control.”

Lisa said that what upset her the most is the “total contempt” that Kasich evinces when speaking of government workers. She said that people in her agency worked hard, but that even before she was laid off, budget cutbacks had meant that one worker was doing the job of two or even three. Deloris added, “These jobs aren’t just about us, we help people.”

Lisa and Deloris said that the unions had done little to protect Ohio workers. “There’s really no need to get rid of the unions,” Lisa said. “I think it would be worse without them, but the unions have been giving up concessions and jobs for years.”

Regarding the ongoing attack on pensions and retirement, Deloris added, “The way things are going, we’re going to be working until we’re dead.”



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