

The Wisconsin protests and the re-emergence of the American working class

Bill Van Auken
18 February 2011

Growing mass protests in Wisconsin involving tens of thousands of state workers, teachers, students and their supporters against sweeping attacks on working conditions and democratic rights mark a turning point in the political life of the United States and of the world.

The recent toppling of the presidents of Tunisia and Egypt by mass protests signified the re-emergence of revolutionary struggle by the working class. The conditions that created these struggles, however, are universal—mass unemployment, staggering levels of social inequality, and a political system that is completely impervious to the demands and interests of the vast majority of the population. The eruption of mass protests in Wisconsin is an initial expression of a new era of open class struggle in the country that has long functioned as the center of the world capitalist system, the United States.

After the 1980s—which saw the smashing of the PATCO air traffic controllers strike and the defeat of militant strikes of Hormel, Greyhound, and Phelps Dodge workers—the class struggle in the United States was artificially suppressed. This was made possible due to the thoroughly reactionary role of the AFL-CIO trade union, which has systematically worked to isolate and defeat every struggle of the working class, while integrating itself ever more closely into the corporate and political establishment.

Especially after the liquidation of the Soviet Union by the Stalinist bureaucracy, when the bourgeoisie's triumphalist denunciations of socialism were at their height, some denied that the working class even existed. History—as in the famous phrase from the *Communist Manifesto*, “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles”—it was claimed, had ended.

Two and a half years into the global economic crisis that began with the financial meltdown on Wall Street in the fall of 2008, the working class in the United States is mounting its first major counterattack against the policies of the financial aristocracy. There is a growing realization that the political and economic system has failed. A new social order must emerge.

In Wisconsin, demonstrators have invoked the mass uprising by workers in the Arab world, comparing Madison to Cairo and Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker to Hosni Mubarak. In New York City, students protesting against school closures have chanted, “New York is Egypt.” This is entirely appropriate, and is an expression of a growing sense among workers in every country that they face a common struggle and a common enemy.

The financial aristocracy that rules America is every bit as removed from and hostile to masses of working people as the dictatorial regime that was headed by President Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. In the face of the worst economic crisis in generations—as millions lost their jobs, homes, and incomes—no measures were taken to help working people. Instead, trillions of dollars in public funds were handed over, no questions asked, to Wall Street and a financial elite whose reckless speculation had triggered the crisis in the first place.

At every level of government, the demand now is for the working class to sacrifice. The Obama administration just this week proposed a budget that will slash \$1 trillion, primarily from social programs that benefit the working class. For their part, Walker and his counterparts in Democratic and Republican-run statehouses are destroying jobs and slashing social programs in complete disregard for overwhelming popular opposition, and the social misery such policies create.

The Republican Walker is moving to shred collective bargaining and dictate terms of employment for state employees, imposing drastic attacks on pensions, health care and working conditions, while keeping wage increases below the rising cost of living. A few of the other measures proposed across the country are:

* In North Carolina, Democratic Governor Bev Purdue presented a budget slashing over 10,000 public employees' jobs, while further reducing corporate tax rates, already among the lowest in the country.

* In Michigan, Republican Governor Rick Snyder proposed drastic cuts in state funding for schools, local communities and universities that will translate into severe cuts in services and jobs. While seeking to tax retired workers' pensions, Snyder proposed slashing \$1.8 billion from state business taxes.

* And in New York City, "independent" Mayor Michael Bloomberg presented a municipal budget calling for laying off 4,666 teachers and eliminating another 1,500 teachers' jobs through attrition. The billionaire mayor intends to carry out the cuts, even though soaring Wall Street profits give the city \$2 billion in extra revenue.

That such policies are proposed, let alone pursued, testifies to the sclerotic character of official politics, and the immense social tensions developing outside of it.

Wisconsin's governor provided the starkest expression of the real state of class relations in the United States today by vowing that he would answer any resistance by mobilizing the National Guard. The last time that the National Guard was employed this way in Wisconsin was after the 1886 Haymarket massacre in Chicago, when state militiamen were called out to shoot striking steelworkers in Milwaukee.

Walker's threat is not idle. Class tensions in the United States today are sharper than at any time in the past three quarters of a century. Social inequality and the concentration of wealth by the top 1 percent—which now controls well over one third of the country's wealth—are more extreme today than at any time since the "Gilded Age," when state violence against the workers movement was common.

The events in Wisconsin are a clear indication that the United States is entering a new period of social upheaval. The working class is driven into struggle by the objective crisis of capitalism and by the determination of the ruling class to defend its wealth through a ruthless attack on all the rights of working people—the right to a job, to a living wage, to education, health care and a secure retirement.

A new political perspective is required to carry forward these struggles. First, absolutely no confidence can be placed in the trade unions, which have done everything they can to bolster the Democratic Party and suppress any genuine movement of workers. In Wisconsin, union executives are saying that they accept the need for cuts, but do not want to give up their seat at the bargaining table. In fact, their main goal is to preserve their financial base through the dues check-off system.

Workers must reject out of hand the concessions called for by union leaders and the entire political establishment. The budget deficit in Wisconsin is a tiny fraction of the wealth of the

country's billionaires. Indeed, the total budget deficit of all 50 states is about one-tenth of the net wealth of only the 400 richest Americans. This wealth, and the trillions expended to bail out the banks, must be reclaimed to meet the basic social needs of vast majority of the population.

A struggle against budget cuts requires the unification of the entire working class and youth in Wisconsin and throughout the country. Organizations independent of the trade unions must be built—rank and file committees of workers and students to unite public sector and private sector workers as well as youth in the workplaces, schools and neighborhoods of Wisconsin and beyond. Preparations should be made now for a general strike of all workers against the cutbacks.

Above all, what is required is a political struggle, which begins from the understanding that nothing can be defended so long as the working class is subordinated to the Democratic Party and the capitalist two-party system. The representatives of the capitalist class, in proclaiming that the preservation of capitalism requires the destruction of the jobs and living conditions of the vast majority of the population, are in fact acknowledging the historical bankruptcy of the system they defend.

The reemergence of the class struggle will bring with it a revival of the fight for socialism. As the American working class enters a new era of social upheaval, the critical task now is the building of a revolutionary socialist party to lead these struggles. The WSWS urges all its readers to take part in this fight by attending the SEP conferences and joining the Socialist Equality Party today.

Bill Van Auken



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact