

The struggle of Wisconsin workers enters a new stage

Jerry White
21 February 2011

Over the past week, the midwestern US state of Wisconsin has erupted in mass working class protests involving tens of thousands of people. The demonstrations are an initial expression of the reemergence of open struggles of the working class, the likes of which have not been seen in the US for a quarter century.

Saturday's demonstrations were the largest so far, with 75,000 protesters converging on the state's capital, Madison. They joined several thousand who have been occupying the capitol building to protest plans by Republican Governor Scott Walker to slash benefits for public employees, gut education and other essential services, and destroy the bargaining rights of 175,000 state and local government workers.

A mood of militancy and confidence filled the air as teachers, firefighters and other public employees were joined by steel, auto, construction and other private sector workers, along with high school and college students, in a march that surrounded the state capitol.

The events in Wisconsin are a sign of what is to come. It has been an entire generation since workers in the US have been able to participate in mass social struggles. The AFL-CIO trade unions have worked to artificially suppress every sign of working class resistance. The betrayal of the 1981 PATCO strike—and the unions' complicity in Reagan's firing of 12,000 air traffic controllers—was followed by a decade of isolated and defeated strikes.

The virtual disappearance of strikes from American life coincided with an explosive growth of social inequality and a vast transfer of wealth from the working class to the richest one percent of society.

Social tensions have now reached a breaking point. Two and half years since the eruption of the financial crisis, more than 26 million workers cannot find a full-time job. State governments, under both Democrats and Republicans, are responding to budget deficits by closing schools, libraries, clinics and other public facilities, and carrying out attacks on state and municipal employees.

Meanwhile, Wall Street share values have fully recovered since the crash of 2008 and the corporations and their top executives are richer than ever. President Obama has refused to provide a penny of relief to workers losing their jobs, homes and life savings. Instead he has outlined plans to slash a trillion dollars from vitally needed social services, to pay for the bailout of Wall Street, the extension of the Bush era tax cuts for the rich and the Pentagon war machine. And this is only the beginning.

The emergence of open class conflict is exposing myths propagated by the political establishment. Among these is the supposed mass support for the "Tea Party." Largely a media creation, fueled by millions of dollars from corporate billionaires, the Tea Party backers of Governor Walker could muster no more than a small crowd of demoralized supporters in Madison Saturday. The overwhelming popular sentiment, expressed by nearly everyone one encountered in the city, was support for the protests.

A number of sharp political issues confront the workers in Wisconsin. The immediate target of the protesters is Walker, an unabashed representative of the most reactionary corporations and political interests. For Walker, the destruction of public employees' rights is a matter of principle, and a means of institutionalizing a

quasi-dictatorship in the workplace.

However, the workers of Wisconsin and the entire country confront no less determined enemies in the Democratic Party and the trade union officials, now nominally at the head of the protests. In fact, the demonstrations against Walker's bill erupted largely spontaneously. The Democrats and their allies in the trade unions have quickly moved to try to contain these struggles and direct them back into safe channels.

The Democratic representatives and union leaders are openly proclaiming that they accept all the cuts contained in Walker's bill, only objecting to the provisions that would eliminate collective bargaining rights for most public workers. They are working to create conditions in which a "compromise" bill that contains all the cuts, while maintaining the existing union structure, can be presented as a victory.

The state's two largest government unions, the Wisconsin State Employees Union and the Wisconsin Education Association Council, have already agreed to impose the governor's economic demands if he allows them to maintain their legal position as bargaining agents for workers.

Not only do the Democrats support the destruction of the living conditions of the working class, they also have no more interest in the democratic rights of workers than the Republicans. Their aim is not to defend the right of workers to organize and fight against the corporations; but to maintain a union apparatus that has proven to be a crucial instrument in suppressing working class struggles and enforcing cuts. Indeed, Democratic governors in states like New York and California are relying on the unions precisely for this purpose.

For the union executives, their only concern is retaining workers as a source of dues income. For them preserving "collective bargaining rights" only means maintaining a "seat at the table" with the employers so they can personally benefit from bargaining away the jobs and living standards of their members.

As for the budget-cutter in chief, President Obama, he too has declared that workers in Wisconsin must be prepared to "sacrifice," directing his criticism of Walker at the latter's attack on the trade unions. If federal

government employees went on strike against the two-year wage freeze imposed by the White House, the Democratic president's response would be no less ruthless than the Wisconsin governor's.

There is a logic to the class struggle, one that is bringing workers in Wisconsin and throughout the country into direct conflict with the entire political system. Workers are fighting for their very livelihoods. They cannot live with what amounts to a 20 percent pay cut and devastating cuts in public education and state universities for their children.

This collision between the working class and the trade unions and the Democratic Party is developing quickly. Already on Sunday a mass meeting of 3,000 teachers in Madison rejected efforts by union officials to end their job action and order them back to work today.

To carry forward the struggle, workers will require new tools. They must break free from the apparatus of the trade unions, which work to suffocate them, demoralize them and lead them to defeat. New organizations must be constructed to unify all sections of the working class—public and private, employed and unemployed—along with students and youth. The struggles of workers in Wisconsin must be linked to the fight of workers throughout the country against budget cuts and in defense of their basic rights.

Above all, a new party and program is required. The fight against budget cuts must be linked to the struggle against the corporate and financial aristocracy that has looted the country and wields control over the entire political system. This means the fight for socialism and the building of the Socialist Equality Party.

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