

The Wisconsin struggle and collective bargaining

Jerry White
22 February 2011

The mass demonstrations in the Wisconsin state capital, which have already involved more than 200,000 workers and young people, continued for the seventh straight day Monday, with tens of thousands demanding the withdrawal of Republican Governor Scott Walker's proposal to slash public spending and attack the wages and rights of the state's 175,000 public employees.

A continued walkout by teachers was carried out in defiance of a back-to-work order by leaders of the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), which is moving to wind down the protests. Graduate student teaching assistants at the University of Wisconsin voted to cancel classes and join demonstrations today.

The growing movement expresses a basic conflict between the working class and the entire economic and political setup in the United States. Public employees are being particularly targeted because they are intimately connected to the social programs being slashed by every level of government throughout the country.

In the course of the struggle, fundamental differences between the interests of the workers and those of the official leaders of the protests have quickly emerged. In all of the statements by WEAC and the Wisconsin State Employees Union, union leaders say they accept the governor's demands to impose the cost of pensions and health care on public employees, but they will not accept the abolition of collective bargaining.

A great deal is revealed here. The union officials' references to "collective bargaining" are entirely cynical. By declaring their willingness to accept every concession beforehand, they have given up collective bargaining, if this term is to have any substantive meaning at all—that is, the right of the workers to fight

against the demands of the corporations and the state. The unions have already bargained away everything, leaving the working class to collectively suffer.

The unions' objection to the governor's attack on collective bargaining refers only to their own quite independent interests, particularly with regards to the dues checkoff system.

This issue has a history. In their initial formation in the 1930s and 1940s, the unions faced the problem of achieving stability in the face of the relentless hostility of the corporations to the struggle of workers. The closed shop and automatic dues check off system emerged as a means of preserving a certain organizational protection under capitalism and combating the union-busting of big business.

There was an implicit danger in the dues check off system, however. Gone were the days when a shop steward would have to resolve a worker's grievance before the worker would part with his dues money. The stabilization of the union structure and the steady flow of dues guaranteed by the employer tended to liberate the unions from accountability to their own membership and the control of the rank and file.

At the same time, the establishment of dues check off was tied to an acceptance of the capitalist system itself. With the recognition of unions and the agreement of the employer to deduct a portion of workers' wages for dues came the expectation that the union would enforce the terms of the contract. The AFL-CIO unions rejected the path of political struggle through the formation of an independent labor party, let alone the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. They relied instead on the government to sanction and institutionalize their relationship with the employers.

During the post-war boom, workers were able to win through the trade unions significant concessions,

despite the pro-capitalist orientation of the bureaucracy. With the decline of American capitalism, beginning in the 1960s and accelerating through the 1970s and 1980s, the unions' defense of capitalism took on a new form. Increasingly, their primary function became the suppression of working class struggles and the enforcement of concessions on their own members. The interests of the bureaucracy became entirely divorced from the interests of the membership.

This process has reached a certain culmination in the present situation in Wisconsin. That the public employees union can announce that collective bargaining is the most essential issue at stake, while openly abandoning the defense of the economic needs of the workers, only underscores the direct antagonism between the interests of the rank-and-file workers and the union.

For the Democratic Party, the trade unions are important assets not only because of the millions in dues money that flows into their campaign coffers. Most importantly, it is because the role the unions play in suppressing working class opposition and imposing the dictates of the corporations and the government.

That is why Obama abhorred the "assault on unions" in Wisconsin in comments to the media last week, while insisting workers had to "make adjustments" due to state's budget crisis.

For the workers, however, there is a justified hostility to Walker's attack on collective bargaining. While the trade unions no longer represent the interests of the workers, it is up to the workers themselves—not the reactionary pro-corporate heel Walker—to deal with these institutions. As opposed to the union heads, the workers understand by "collective bargaining" their right to organize independently and fight for their interests against the corporations.

To carry forward the struggle to defend their right to a quality job, health care and a good pension, workers must break free from the unions and form new organizations through which their interests can find genuine expression—rank and file committees to unite all sections of the working class in a common fight.

Under conditions of a deepening capitalist crisis, however, the interests and rights of workers cannot be defended through collective bargaining, let alone within the framework of the rotten institutions that have long ceased to be workers' organizations.

The struggles of workers in Wisconsin and the spreading of this movement around the country pose the necessity for a political struggle against the capitalist system and corporate-controlled government, and the reorganization of society along socialist lines.

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