

Huge protest march opposes Wisconsin cuts

Jerry White
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An estimated 75,000 workers and young people marched in the state capital of Wisconsin Saturday in the largest of a weeklong series of demonstrations. The protests involved teachers, firefighters and other government employees around the state, along with high school and college students and thousands of private sector workers.

In addition to those marching outside, some 8,000 protesters jammed inside of the capitol building in Madison, which has been occupied by thousands of workers and students since early last week. The huge crowd dwarfed a much smaller group of right-wing Tea Party protesters bused in to support Governor Scott Walker and the Republican-controlled state legislature.

A winter storm limited the crowds at the capital Sunday—the protests were largely confined to the inside of the Capitol building—but the turnout today could be the largest yet, as it coincides with a furlough day for some 70,000 public employees. The state's previous governor, Jim Doyle, a Democrat, imposed the furlough.

Tens of thousands have descended on Madison to protest the plan by the newly elected Republican governor to close a \$3.6 billion budget deficit over the next two years through draconian cuts in social services, including a \$900 million cut in public education, and imposing a de facto 20 percent wage cut for public employees who will be forced to pay larger deductions for their pension and health care plans.

Walker is also seeking to gut collective bargaining rights for public employees in the state, which was the first in the nation to have a comprehensive agreement with government workers in 1959. The measure would end automatic dues deductions and require local votes each year to maintain union recognition. In addition unions would be barred from negotiating on any issue

except wages, while raises could not exceed the rise in the Consumer Price Index unless approved by a public referendum.

While workers and young people have poured into the state capital all week long to fight all of these attacks, officials from the two largest public-employee unions, the Wisconsin State Employees and Wisconsin Educational Association Council (WEAC), have already offered to accept all of the Republican governor's economic demands. The only thing they want in return is that he drop the proposal to do away with the dues checkoff system and restrict the unions' role in bargaining away their members' jobs, working conditions and living standards.

In a statement WEAC President Mary Bell said, "Ask any teacher, and they'll tell you they didn't get into this profession for the money. We have said all along that this isn't about pay and benefits. Let's be very clear: we are prepared to implement the financial concessions proposed to help our state in these tough times... We will meet the governor half way, but we will not be denied our right to collectively bargain."

Bell signaled an effort to scale back the protests in Madison, calling on teachers to go back to work next week, ending the strike wave that culminated Friday in the shutdown of the school system in Milwaukee, the state's largest. She said, "As Monday and Tuesday roll on, people who are supposed to be in class will be in class, and we will see what the week brings."

But at a local union meeting Sunday, Madison teachers decided they would not report for work Monday, which is not a holiday in their district. The *Wisconsin State Journal* reported the teachers would go back to work on Tuesday. Madison teachers have been calling in sick since last Wednesday.

Meanwhile, Walker was sticking to his budget plan Sunday, in spite of offers by public worker unions to give him the financial concessions he wants if he drops

efforts to repeal their bargaining rights. The Republican governor said that the budget repair bill's cuts to public worker benefits and its repeal of union rights were both necessary to give state and local government the "flexibility" to manage the fiscal crisis.

He also threatened that 10,000 to 12,000 state employee jobs would be eliminated if the wage and benefit cuts were not put through. "I don't want a single person laid off in the public nor in the private sector, and that's why this is a much better alternative than losing jobs," Walker told "Fox News Sunday."

In a transparent effort to split the working class, Walker has attempted to win support for his right-wing plans by appealing to private sector workers who have been hit by wage and benefit concessions and mass layoffs in the state. Thousands of these workers, however, have joined the public-employee protests, recognizing that the attack on wages, benefits and workplace rights will have a devastating affect on all sections of the working class, private and public.

State Democratic politicians have hailed the capitulation by union officials to Walker's demands for wage and benefit cuts and proposed a "compromise," under which the workers accept the cuts in return for preservation of bargaining rights, dues checkoff and union recognition.

State Senator Jon Erpenbach issued a statement on behalf of the Democratic caucus in the state senate, which has gone into hiding in Illinois to block the legislation temporarily by depriving the legislature of a quorum. The statement reads: "I have been informed that all state and local public employees – including teachers – have agreed to the financial aspects of Governor Walker's request. This includes Walker's requested concessions on public employee health care and pension. In return they ask only that the provisions that deny their right to collectively bargain are removed. This will solve the budget challenge."

State Senate Minority Leader Mark Miller added, "We continue to call on the governor and Republicans to allow us to get serious about addressing fiscal issues and creating jobs and drop the unrelated items that do nothing to help us balance our budget."

The Obama administration has adopted the same posture—support for the cuts, while keeping the unions involved in the process and using them as an instrument for imposing sacrifices on the workers. New White

House press secretary Jay Carney told reporters on Air Force One Friday that the president "is very understanding of the need for state governments, governors, state legislatures to reduce spending, to be—to make tough choices, to be fiscally responsible. He's doing that at the federal level, and he understands that states need to do that at the state level."



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