

As Wisconsin protests continue, teachers union ends walkouts

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Major demonstrations continued in Madison on Monday, with a crowd estimated at between 5,000 and 20,000 braving bitter winter weather to demonstrate in the capital of Wisconsin. It was the eighth day of large protests against a bill backed by Governor Scott Walker that would force major wage cuts on public sector workers and strip them of basic workplace rights.

But the largest single public employee union in the state, the Wisconsin Education Association Council, confirmed that it was calling off all teachers' strikes and telling its 98,000 members to return to work. The WEAC web site posted prominently the statement by union chief Mary Bell Sunday: "To educators whose contracts do not recognize Presidents' Day [Monday], we call on them to return to duty by day, and find ways to be vocal and visible after their workday is done."

Teachers, with those in Madison in the forefront, have walked off the job in the thousands. School districts in Milwaukee, Racine, Eau Claire, La Crosse, Janesville and dozens of smaller towns and cities have been closed. It is not clear how many teachers have been involved, but it is certainly well over 10,000, and tens of thousands of workdays have been lost.

Both Milwaukee and Madison school districts, the two largest in the state, were closed Monday but expected to open Tuesday with full complements of teachers, officials said.

Other unions seem to be pulling back on the campaign as well, despite the overwhelming public support among working people around the state. There were press reports that the state AFL-CIO and AFSCME are effectively conceding passage of the bill this week, and seeking to divert the movement into a series of isolated recall campaigns against selected Republican state senators. (Governor Walker himself cannot be recalled until next year.)

Opposition to the bill remains strong on the campuses of the University of Wisconsin, where students, graduate students and teachers have all been engaged in protest actions, many of them traveling long distances to Madison to join the marches outside the state capitol.

Graduate student assistants at the University of Wisconsin-Madison called for a "teach-out" Tuesday to protest the anti-worker bill, a means of continuing the campaign of protest without an actual strike. The UW-Madison Teaching Assistants' Association said it was calling for the teach-out rather than a walkout: "We are calling for instructors to use their discretion to cancel classes, reschedule them or hold them off campus."

More than 300 faculty members at UW-Madison, who are not unionized, signed a letter expressing concern of the loss of collective bargaining rights for state workers, including the graduate student assistants now organized in the TAA. Many faculty members are expected to cancel classes Tuesday in sympathy with the "teach-out."

The letter said, referring to the budget cuts proposed by Walker, "Such cuts will also make it very difficult for us to recruit the high quality staff and graduate students that have helped make UW-Madison a leading research university in the United States and internationally."

The TAA has been working under an expired contract for nearly a year and a half, with extensions agreed with the university while negotiations continue. Governor Walker has mandated an end to these extensions March 13, meaning that teaching assistants will have no protection against victimization or cuts in tuition remission by the university.

The teaching assistants were the first group of workers to fight back publicly against Walker's legislation, staging a demonstration on Monday,

February 14, when a crowd estimated at over 1,200 students and graduate students marched from the campus to the capital building in protest against attacks on state government workers and Walker's threat to deploy the National Guard.

There would be overwhelming support for an open-ended general strike of state and local workers, including teachers. But the trade union bureaucracy is completely opposed to such a step, not only because it would require breaking state law, but because it would bring to the fore the fundamental social grievances of public sector workers and indeed the entire working class, which would inevitably come into conflict with the aims of the union hierarchy.

While workers and youth are demanding an end to wage-cutting and state budget cutbacks in social spending, the unions have repeatedly insisted that they will accept all concessions except those the Republicans have aimed at the very existence of the unions, especially the dues check-off.

Walker's plan is a far-ranging assault on public sector workers. By increasing employee contributions to health care and retirement plans, it would force wage cuts of between 8 and 20 percent, workers say. It also gives the governor new powers to unilaterally intervene against striking workers whenever he declares a state of emergency. Walker has provoked rage by threatening to call out the National Guard to enforce the bill.

The *Wisconsin State Journal* reported Monday that at least six National Guard officers in plainclothes had toured a state prison facility last week. Walker has said that the troops would be sent into the prisons to replace prison guards if they joined any larger walkout by state employees.

Of greater concern to the union officials, as they repeatedly stress, is the bill's measures aimed at "collective bargaining." It would force yearly elections to maintain union certifications, and would reportedly end the right of certain categories of labor, including teaching assistants and professors, to organize legal unions. The bill's abolition of the mandatory dues check-off system would force the bureaucracies to survive on voluntary contributions and erode their ability to provide resources to the Democratic Party.

The union officialdom is an important constituent of the Democratic Party. But animating the actions and pronouncements of Democratic lawmakers in

Wisconsin, as well as President Obama, is their view that the unions are indispensable tools for enforcing wage and budget cuts, which are taking place across the country under Democratic and Republican governors alike.

Democratic senators walked out of the capitol on Thursday to temporarily block the bill's passage by denying the Republican-controlled Senate a quorum. They evaded a police manhunt and remain in hiding in neighboring Illinois. The maneuver aimed to head off a social explosion had the bill been passed, with tens of thousands of angry workers and youth at the capitol's doorstep. They also aim to open the bill up to negotiation so that certain concessions can be granted to the unions while the legislation's attacks on wages and the right to strike are kept intact.

Republicans have insisted they will not alter the bill. On Monday, state Republicans announced they might capitalize on the Democrats' absence by passing other bills, including a measure that would require voters to produce photo identification before they can cast ballots in elections. Another Republican senator has proposed a compromise that would see a sunset clause added to the bill allowing the restoration of the dues check-off while maintaining the cuts to workers' pay.

It is likely that the Democratic senators will soon drop their opposition. Yet workers and youth in Wisconsin are expressing determined opposition. Their struggle is beginning to attract support and similar actions across the US.

Dozens of demonstrations were held on Monday across the US in support of Wisconsin's workers, including in locations as far away as Maryland, Nevada, West Virginia and New Hampshire. In the capital of Washington state, Olympia, an estimated 2,000 protesters crowded into the capitol building to voice solidarity with workers in Wisconsin and oppose budget cuts in their own state.



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