

Wisconsin protests continue

Jerry White
23 February 2011

Demonstrations continued in the state capital of Wisconsin Tuesday against Governor Scott Walker's budget-cutting proposal and attack on public employees. Protests inspired by the stand taken by Wisconsin workers also spread to other states across the country, including Indiana and Ohio.

In Indianapolis workers marched at the state capitol against Republican governor Mitch Daniels' proposal to restrict bargaining by public school teachers. In Columbus, marchers denounced a bill that would prohibit collective bargaining for 42,000 state workers in addition to 19,500 workers in the state's university and college system. (See "Columbus, Ohio rally against anti-worker legislation") Protests also took place in Lansing, Michigan, Boston and other cities.

In New Jersey, Republican Governor Chris Christie announced a state budget Tuesday that would double a property tax rebate program only if lawmakers voted to require public workers pay 30 percent of their health care benefits, more than triple what they pay now.

In addition to draconian cuts in public and higher education, Medicaid and other services, Wisconsin's Republican governor is demanding public employees sharply increase their contributions to health care and pension benefits, a move that would result in hundreds of dollars in lost wages each month.

The governor is also seeking to strip teachers, nurses, firefighters and other state and municipal employees of bargaining rights and bar negotiations on any issues except pay increases, which could not exceed a rise in the Consumer Price Index. The measure would also end automatic deduction of union dues and compel bargaining units to have a revote every year to maintain union representation.

In a 10-minute "Fireside Chat" Tuesday night, Walker reiterated his determination to press ahead and once again attempted to pit private sector workers against public employees by claiming public workers had not given up the type of wage and benefit concessions during the recession as workers in private industry.

An estimated 15,000 workers and young people joined the protests at the state capitol in Madison on Tuesday. Private sector workers, including Teamsters members from Minnesota, Illinois and Michigan, joined the demonstrations to defend public employees. Firefighters camped in the state capitol during the night to express their solidarity with the struggle, although Governor Walker has excluded them from his collective bargaining measures.

An estimated 2,000 professors, teaching assistants and undergraduate students walked out of their classrooms at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW) Tuesday and marched to the state capitol.

Under Walker's proposed budget, which will be released on March 1, the university could lose \$50 million to \$75 million, leading to a tuition increase of as much as 20 percent for students over the next two years. Bargaining rights for UW hospital employees and teaching assistants are also under threat.

William, co-steward in the Teaching Assistants Association, said, "They want to break our union. Without a union we have no way to guarantee we will keep our tuition remission. The provost has promised we would, but there is no way to assure that—it might just last one more semester. We would lose rights we fought for over the last 40 years, and what we pay for health care would double."

Governor Walker threatened that mass layoffs of state employees would start as early as next week if his bill does not pass soon. The governor has repeatedly said up to 1,500 workers could lose their jobs by July if his proposal is not passed. "Hopefully we don't get to that point," Walker told the Associated Press.

There is growing sentiment among workers to continue mass action. On Monday night, the South Central Federation of Labor passed a resolution calling for a general strike of close to 100 unions, representing about 45,000 workers, if Walker's budget repair bill is passed by the state legislature and signed into law by the governor.

The state's two largest unions—the 98,000-member Wisconsin Education Association Council and the 60,000-member Wisconsin State Employees Union—have already acceded to the governor's economic demands. They are limiting their opposition to the issue of collective bargaining rights.

This has revealed the chasm between workers and the trade unions. While workers want to defend their rights in order to oppose the attack on their jobs and livelihoods, the trade union officials want to defend their legal status to negotiate wage and benefit concessions, and continue to collect union dues.

The concessions they have already offered will have a devastating effect on the state's 175,000 public employees and their families. "My health insurance would go up to \$226 a month and I'd have to pay an extra \$200 or so a month towards retirement," Mary, a public employee, told the WWS. "I'm already losing \$150 a month because of furlough days. Walker claims furloughs will end in July. Even with that I'll still be losing \$250 a month with the increased deductions—and there is no saying whether he will reinstitute furlough days."

"Two years ago, we lost a 3 percent raise," Mary continued. "Every now and then we get a 1 percent increase over the 19 years I've worked. That doesn't match the increase in cost of living. I've had to refinance my house from a 15-year to a 30-year mortgage because my debt will exceed my income. Cable TV and the Internet are the only 'luxuries' I have, and they will be going soon because that's \$125 a month. I don't know how the people with kids are going to do it. I don't see how we're eating at the trough and making big bucks, like the governor says."

The trade union bureaucracy is working with the Democrats to wind down the protests. On Sunday, WEAC President Mary Bell issued a statement telling teachers to return to their classrooms and "find ways to be vocal and visible after their workday is done." Madison teachers voted to defy the WEAC president and stayed out on Monday.

After four days of job actions, however, teachers returned to work Tuesday. Jesse Jackson held a rally in front of East High School in Madison—one of the schools where students walked out of classes last week to support their teachers—to lend support to the union's back-to-work order.

State Democrats have postured as defenders of public employees even as they have joined in slashing social spending and gutting the living standards of workers.

They have hailed the unions for agreeing to the wage and benefit concessions and have criticized the governor for failing to collaborate with union officials to impose them.

Senator Kathleen Vinehout, one of the 14 Senate Democrats who fled to Illinois last week to delay a vote on the bill, told the *Wisconsin State Journal* that Democrats were able to deal with a budget deficit twice the size of the current deficit in 2009 without triggering massive upheaval throughout the state. This is because the Democratic governor, Jim Doyle, used the services of the unions to push through furlough days and other devastating concessions.

Security at the state capitol was increased Tuesday morning as both the Republican-controlled Senate and Assembly were scheduled to be in session. Guards reportedly let in only 10 protesters at a time and they were forced to pass through a metal detector. State police also maintained a heavy presence and there some indications that a move might be made soon to clear the capitol, which has been occupied by thousands of demonstrators since last week.

There is overwhelming support for the Wisconsin workers among the widest layers of the working population. According to a new *USA Today*/Gallup Poll, Americans strongly oppose laws taking away the collective bargaining power of public employee unions. The poll found 61 percent would oppose a law in their state similar to the governor's proposal in Wisconsin, compared with 33 percent who would favor such legislation.

Lynda, a restaurant franchise owner in Kenosha, Wisconsin, south of Milwaukee, told the WWS, "The teachers went back to work but they need to keep this thing alive. The governor is grandstanding like a big hero. But he speaks for the Koch brothers and the billionaires.

"Here in Kenosha they just shut another Chrysler plant down. This was a big union town, but they have lost a lot of jobs. First Walker is going after the public employees, then it will be the private sector workers next. If we don't watch out it is going to be like the serfs and the landlords again."



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact