

# Protests continue as Wisconsin politicians debate attack on public employees

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The Wisconsin legislature began debate on Tuesday over a bill that would force major wage cuts on government workers and further restrict their legal right to strike and organize. Democratic legislators are maneuvering with the trade unions to wind down protests and reach a compromise with Republicans that will leave intact the drastic cuts to workers' wages. At the same time the Democrats are seeking to remove elements of the bill aimed at destroying the public sector unions in Wisconsin, such as the legislation's abolition of the automatic dues check-off and its requirement that unions be re-certified by election each year.

The bill, pushed by Republican Governor Scott Walker, has provoked massive resistance among Wisconsin workers and youth, who have launched a wave of school and college walkouts and an unprecedented series of demonstrations, including an ongoing occupation of the capitol building in Madison going back to Tuesday, February 15. Inspired by developments in Wisconsin, similar protests and sympathy actions are proliferating across the US.

The demonstrations are anticipated to continue. According to Chad, an unemployed worker in Madison who has attended the demonstrations, rallies at the capitol continue to draw many thousands and are expected to be larger over the weekend. Hundreds of workers and youth have been streaming into Wisconsin from across the US, hoping to take a stand against wage-cutting and attacks on workplace rights. Several hundred teachers from New York City went to Madison on Wednesday, as did 160 government workers from Los Angeles.

In an effort to stall for time while negotiating with Republicans to reach a compromise, assembly Democrats forced a debate on the bill through Tuesday

night and Wednesday morning by introducing a series of amendments that were voted down along party lines. The debate continued all day Wednesday, with Democrats promising to introduce as many as 200 amendments. The bill was to have been first considered by the senate, but the flight of 14 Democratic senators to Illinois on Thursday, February 17 denied Republicans a quorum. They remain in Illinois.

The unions and the Democrats are in fundamental agreement with the Republicans that the benefits and wages of government workers have to be rolled back. Similar measures are being put in place by President Obama and by Democratic governors across the US with union backing. But they insist that the union bureaucracies must be involved in the implementation of these cuts. At the same time they seek a settlement with Wisconsin Republicans that will defuse growing momentum and confidence among workers and youth, who are being driven into struggle by the impact of the social crisis on every aspect of their lives.

Kayla, a high school student from Mount Horeb, near Madison, participated in a school walkout organized via Facebook, and demonstrated for most of last week at the capitol. "My mom's a state worker, and a single mom," she said. "I have two little brothers, and I want them to be able to have a decent education and be able to afford college."

Amanda, a state worker from Madison, seconded those sentiments. "A lot is at stake here," she said. "I'm concerned about my family being able to make it because I'm the main breadwinner. I don't make a lot of money, and the cuts to wages from the added contributions for pensions and health care mean a lot."

Kyle, a technical college student near Madison, said he attended the demonstrations because he sees the bill as part of a far-reaching attack on living standards. "As

an aspiring artist and musician, I'm worried that I'm not going to be able to find people to buy what I can make."

Walker has insisted he will not negotiate, and has won the backing of a number of prominent Republicans from across the US along with the so-called Tea Party. He will no doubt be considered a strong candidate for the Republican presidential nomination next year because of willingness to take on Wisconsin workers.

According to *Forbes*, Charles and David Koch, who have directly and indirectly supplied Walker and other Wisconsin Republicans with hundreds of thousands of dollars, have a combined personal worth of \$43 billion. This is about 12 times the multi-year budget deficit of Wisconsin, which is being used to gut public education and every form of social spending in this state of 5.6 million people.

The trade union bureaucracy repeatedly points to the supposed popularity of right-wing forces to justify their capitulation to Walker's economic demands. In fact, there is overwhelming support in Wisconsin and around the country for a fight in defense of workers' living standards and social programs. The real relationship of forces was demonstrated Saturday when only a handful of Walker's demoralized Tea Party supporters showed up in Madison and were overwhelmed by 75,000 workers and young people marching against his reactionary bill.

The trade union officials, however, are opposed to any serious struggle. They have already agreed to Walker's economic demands. They agree workers must pay for the bankruptcy of the states—which is the product of tax cuts to the rich and the trillions squandered on the Wall Street bailout. Their only concern is preserving the legal status of the unions to negotiate away the jobs, living standards and working conditions of the workers they supposedly represent.

But workers cannot live with what amounts to more than a \$400 a month pay cut, coming on top of furlough days and other concessions implemented by the state's previous governor, Democrat Jim Doyle. Nor can workers accept hundreds of millions in further cuts in public and higher education and other services.

Workers must reject the capitulation by the unions and initiate a fight for a general strike of all workers in Wisconsin to defeat this attack. The struggle must be united with the growing movement of the working class

throughout the US, and, in fact, the world.

This requires the building of rank-and-file committees, independent of the trade unions and the Democratic Party, to mobilize the widest layers of workers and young people in a common fight to defend the living standards and democratic rights of the working class. This is, above all, a political fight against the entire economic and political set up in the United States, which sacrifices the interests of masses of working people to benefit the wealthy few.



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