

Wisconsin state assembly passes anti-worker bill

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The lower house of the Wisconsin state legislature voted overwhelmingly early Friday morning to approve legislation demanded by Republican Governor Scott Walker that will slash wages and benefits and effectively abolish collective bargaining for public employees throughout the state.

The bill was passed by a vote of 51 to 17, when the Republican-controlled state assembly put an end to a three-day debate and halted discussion of any further Democratic amendments. The vote was conducted so abruptly, shortly after 1 a.m., that two-thirds of the Democrats were not able to register their votes in time. The Republicans enjoy a 57 to 38 majority in the lower house, with one independent.

More than a thousand protesters were in the state capitol at the time of the state Assembly vote, and they voiced their continued opposition by singing “We Shall Overcome” as soon as they learned of the action. The assembly Democrats have conducted their semi-filibuster as a publicity stunt to win credit for opposing the bill, while they actually support the draconian cuts in wages, health care and pensions that it contains.

Only hours before the vote, a delegation of assembly Democrats met with a top Walker aide, reiterating their offer to vote for all the cuts if the provisions ending dues check-off, automatic union recognition and union bargaining rights were removed. Walker has flatly refused any such deal, insisting that the destruction of collective bargaining is an essential feature of his strategy for dealing with the state fiscal crisis.

The Democratic minority in the state Senate is still blocking passage of the bill by absenting themselves from the capitol. Senate rules require a quorum of 20 senators present to adopt any legislation with financial implications, and the Republicans hold a 19-14 majority.

The state senate took up the bill Friday, despite the lack of a quorum, but cannot give it final passage. But

Republicans took action to insure that the legislation is not amendable if and when the Democrats return, meaning there would be an up-or-down vote on the legislation as drafted by the governor's office.

Walker hailed the state assembly action, and saluted the role of the Democratic minority in agreeing to go through the motions of a debate and dropping efforts to filibuster the bill indefinitely. “The 14 Senate Democrats need to come home and do their jobs,” Walker said in a statement, “just like the Assembly Democrats did.”

The governor began a statewide tour of the districts represented by the Senate Democrats, demanding that they return and warning that thousands of state workers will be laid off if his budget repair bill is not passed immediately. Walker is to present his biennial budget proposal to the legislature next Tuesday, March 1.

The Republican governor has also declared that those who are fighting his anti-worker legislation are opposed to democracy, claiming that he campaigned for the bill “all throughout the election.” Actually, according to a review of the campaign by the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, Walker said nothing about eliminating collective bargaining during the campaign, and he sought and won the endorsement of several police and fire unions.

The budget repair legislation would not only virtually put an end to future collective bargaining, but it calls into question existing contracts for local government and public school employees throughout the state.

Milwaukee City Attorney Grant Langley announced Friday that he was drafting a legal opinion on whether the state could compel city employees to make pension contributions, as required by the bill. Under their current contract, the city makes the pension contribution for many workers as part of their compensation.

The budget repair bill includes a \$976 million reduction in state aid to local education over the next two years. Walker claims that by ending collective bargaining over

most issues, local school districts will be able to recoup the lost aid by cutting salaries, health care and pension costs for their employees.

This plan to pass the cost of the fiscal deficit along to the workers is not only completely reactionary, it is unworkable, because many districts have union contracts already in place which cannot be overridden by state law. The Milwaukee Public Schools, for instance, will lose \$200 million in state aid but have union contracts in place through the 2011-12 school year. The likely result is mass layoffs of school employees when the money runs out.

School districts throughout the state have begun issuing layoff notices to any employee who might conceivably be affected by the worst-case scenario for the state budget. The statutory deadline for nonrenewal of teacher contracts is Monday, February 28, the day before Walker officially unveils the budget. Some districts have gone so far as to issue layoff notices to every single unionized employee, as a “precaution” against lawsuits for unfair dismissal.

Walker is deliberately exacerbating the schools crisis, telling the *Journal-Sentinel* that he was looking into refusing federal funds under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, a long-time target of right-wing ideologues. Wisconsin schools received \$188 million in Title I funds, largely to assist low-income students, so a state rejection would have a devastating effect.

The response of the unions to this right-wing rampage has been completely unserious and impotent. The Wisconsin AFL-CIO proclaimed that it was organizing the largest protests in the history of the state, to be held Thursday at more than two dozen sites.

The actual result was a series of small protests around the state, involving, according to the state AFL-CIO's own count, less than 9,000 people, all told—fewer people than took part in any of the daily protests in Madison over the past week.

The largest protest involved 2,500 in Stevens Point, where the University of Wisconsin has a campus. Less than a 1,000 people participated in three separate protests in Milwaukee, the state's largest city.

In an effort to cover up the deliberate sabotage of the struggle against the Walker administration, the state AFL-CIO cynically changed its description of the Thursday day of protest, calling it “the largest day of demonstrations *outside Madison* in Wisconsin history” (emphasis added).

Encouraged by the steady retreat of the unions and their deliberate stifling of the widespread popular opposition to anti-worker onslaught, the Walker administration and the Republicans in the state legislature are moving to close

down the protests in Madison as well.

The state Department of Administration confirmed that Capitol Police were working with protest organizers to remove large items like mattresses, folding tables and chairs from the state capitol, the second in a series of steps to scale down the occupation of the building by protesters. The first step, taken Wednesday, was to close meeting rooms and offices inside the Capitol after 4 p.m. Friday, the usual closing time.

The rotunda and public hallways still remain open around the clock, and thousands of workers and students are expected to crowd them during protests this weekend. But the intention is clearly to put an end to the occupation before Walker delivers his budget message in the state capitol next Tuesday.

The workers in Wisconsin face enormous dangers from the capitulation of the unions to the right-wing onslaught. They must act independently, without relying on either the parliamentary stunts by the Democrats or the handwringing appeals by the union leaders. It is past time for workers to initiate a fight for a statewide general strike to defeat this attack, and the broadest possible appeal for support from workers throughout the country.

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 setup in the United States, which sacrifices the interests of masses of working people to the wealthy few.



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