

After demonstration of 100,000, union officials prepare to end Wisconsin struggle

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28 February 2011

Saturday saw the largest demonstration yet in the struggle of Wisconsin workers and youth against a bill pushed by Governor Scott Walker that would force major wage cuts on government workers and gut workplace rights.

An estimated 70,000 to 100,000 demonstrated in Madison, in spite of bitter cold and snow. The mood in the demonstration was one of determined opposition to the Republican governor's attack on the working class. (See "Wisconsin workers and youth speak out.")

Even as this powerful demonstration of working class solidarity took place beneath the state capitol building, there were mounting signs that the union bureaucracy was in advanced preparations for putting an end to the struggle. The leaders of the two largest unions—the Wisconsin Education Association Council and the Wisconsin Public Employees Union—have already acceded to the governor's economic demands.

The union officials have limited their efforts to persuading several state Republicans to break with Walker and sign a "compromise" bill with Democrats that would slash public employees' wages and benefits, gut Medicaid, public education and other social services. In return it would preserve the legal status of the unions to collect dues and bargain away the jobs, living standards and working conditions of the workers they ostensibly represent.

On this basis the teachers' union called off job actions by their members as a "sign of good will" to the Republicans. Union officials have gone on record in opposition to the popular demand for a general strike, and workers at Saturday's demonstration told the

World Socialist Web Site that the unions have aligned with Walker in his demand that protesters leave the capitol building.

As of this writing upwards of 800 protesters remained in the capitol defying the threat of arrest and pressure by state Democrats and AFL-CIO officials who urged them to end the two-week occupation of the building. Authorities set a 4 p.m. Sunday deadline to clear out the building and warned that any workers and youth who remained would be arrested. One legal observer said a local convention center had been prepared to process large numbers of those arrested. Concerned that scenes of protesters being dragged away by police could spark public outrage and bring even more demonstrators to Madison, authorities announced shortly before 7 p.m. that the protesters would be allowed to stay the night.

The union officials' effort to shut down the movement exposes the claim, advanced by ex-radical groups such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO), that unions will be "compelled" to fight because they are under attack. The defeat of the bill would require not just large-scale demonstrations—which the union heads are in any case attempting to shut down—but a mobilization of the entire working class in an industrial and political struggle against both parties of big business—Republicans as well as Democrats—and rejection of their demands that the working class be impoverished to enrich those at the top.

The union executives oppose such a mobilization, and after decades of labor-management collaboration on the basis of defending the capitalist system, they are incapable of stopping the destruction of their own organizations.

Indeed, the rapid and coordinated effort to shut down the demonstrations suggests that the union officials are well aware that demands for a general strike and other militant actions are gaining traction with rank-and-file workers. It seeks to head this off at all costs.

When the executive council of Madison's South Central Federation of Labor last week endorsed a general strike—while insisting it had no authority to call a strike and making no plans for it to take place—it signaled that the demand for mass strike action is growing in Wisconsin.

As the *Madison Capital Times* notes, the move by the labor federation was chiefly for public consumption. "Local labor leaders are careful to point out that no strikes have been called; the federation does not have the authority to call a strike and several union leaders stressed that job actions would be individual workers' decisions."

Citing one example, the article quotes David Poklinkoski, president of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 2304. "The local union will not call a general strike—it would be each person's individual decision," he said.

An official with the local Teamsters' union also ruled out participation. Recording secretary Gene Gowey said the Teamsters, who are not affiliated with the local labor council, are "attempting to address issues in a peaceful, law-abiding way."

Democratic legislators, who have been extolled by the unions as workers' allies, have moved toward dropping their pretense of opposition. This week, State Assembly Democrats worked out a deal with Republicans that would allow the bill to pass the lower chamber with reduced debate and amendments. This sets the stage for the return of the 14 Senate Democrats who left the state to deny Republicans a quorum to advance the bill.

"I think obviously people would like to move forward with this and find an agreement that protects workers' rights and balances the budget," Mike Browne, spokesman for Democratic state senate minority leader Mark Miller, told the *Wisconsin State Journal*.

Opposing any sympathy strikes by private sector workers—who have turned out en masse to express their solidarity with public employees—Wisconsin AFL-CIO

president Phil Neuenfeldt called on workers to appeal to "their state senators and representatives about supporting workers rights."

After shutting down job actions by teachers last week, the unions have aligned themselves with Walker's efforts to clear out the State Capitol building. The area open to demonstrators has been progressively scaled back, and on Saturday only one small door was left open for workers to enter the building. Workers say that the unions advised them to clear out on Sunday so the building could be "cleaned."

For the struggle of Wisconsin workers and youth to go forward it is urgently necessary to break from the Democratic Party and the rotten unions and build independent rank-and-file committees to make preparations for a general strike. This must be combined with a fight to unite the struggles throughout the country against budget cutting and attacks on jobs and living standards.

The capitulation of the unions is only emboldening Walker and the political forces he represents. They view the struggle in Wisconsin as an historic opportunity to rapidly accelerate the attack on working class living standards.

On this question, there is absolutely no difference between the trade unions and the Democrats on the one side, and the Republicans and their billionaire Tea Party backers on the other: all are in agreement that the working class must foot the bill for the crisis of American capitalism so that the ruling elite can continue to gorge itself. The only difference is over means—whether or not the unions should be relied upon to enforce the cuts, or discarded entirely.

The struggle of Wisconsin workers—who cannot afford to give up anything more after years of wage and benefit concessions, furloughs and other rollbacks—have placed them on a collision course with the entire corporate-backed political establishment, including the trade unions, and the profit system they defend.



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