

An exchange on “Behind the sellout of the struggle in Wisconsin”

Jerry White
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The following is an exchange on the March 25 WSWs article by Tom Eley, “Behind the sellout of the struggle in Wisconsin.”

The letter writer, Steven Dawes, is a shop steward from local 251 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) in Omaha, Nebraska. The reply is by WSWs writer Jerry White.

This story is way off base. The rush to sign contracts was to insure a continuation of the benefits and working conditions of the workers. Something very easy to understand. Why go out of your way to make union leaders look bad? Do they make 300+ times more than their members like CEOs of most major US companies?

And to think unions and socialists used to be on the same page. I’ve always backed socialism. Together with labor the team passed workers comp, unemployment insurance, and several other important worker protections. I’d be interested in any reply, update, correction, etc., you might have or publish.

Steven L Dawes

Mr. Dawes,

Our article, “Behind the sellout of the struggle in Wisconsin,” details the substantial material interests of the trade union executives in Wisconsin and nationally, which played, and continues to play, the critical role in the betrayal of the struggle of public employees in that state.

You say our story was “way off base” and claim the unions rushed to sign contracts before Walker’s law was implemented in order to “insure a continuation of the benefits and working conditions of the workers.”

You do not attempt to substantiate this claim—nor can you.

The contracts signed with Madison city and school authorities, and at least 150 school districts across the state, impose devastating attacks on the livelihoods of teachers and other public employees, including pay freezes and other concessions. They all incorporate Walker’s demands for higher pension and health care contributions, which will result in a \$4,000 a year loss in pay for the average public employee.

Contrary to your claims, the new contracts also sanction the destruction of working conditions. According to a summary of the two-year contract extension signed by the Green Bay Education Association, “the district can make staffing changes no longer based on seniority,” teachers can be “reassigned as needed and their schedules modified to meet the demands of a particular school, without previous workload restrictions and in some cases added compensation for teachers. Moreover, the mandate on class size has also been suspended, meaning the district no longer needs union approval to add students beyond set levels. And if more students are added, additional compensation for teachers would no longer be required.”

Is this what you call insuring “a continuation of the benefits and working conditions of the workers”? If it is, it only demonstrates the contempt of the trade union officialdom for rank and file workers.

The only continued benefits contained in these contracts are those for the trade union apparatus. The contracts all include the automatic deduction of dues from workers’ paychecks, a provision that is explicitly prohibited under Walker’s new law, but only once a contract expires. By rushing to extend these agreements, the unions have secured their income flow

at the direct expense of the workers they purport to represent.

Tens of thousands of workers conducted a month-long struggle to oppose Walker's attack on bargaining rights and his efforts to criminalize any collective resistance to spending cuts. By accepting Walker's economic demands from the start, the unions abandoned any semblance of collective bargaining.

AFSCME, the Wisconsin Education Council Association and the other unions conspired with the Democrats to block any genuine fight against the concessions and budget cuts and sought to convince the Republicans that it was better to work with the unions to accomplish their goals than against them. This is, after all, what the unions did with Walker's Democratic predecessor, Governor Jim Doyle, and what they are currently doing in states with Democratic governors and, on the federal level, with the Obama administration.

It is true that Trumka, McEntee, Weingarten, Van Roekel—who make between \$283,000 and \$620,000—and their lesser-paid Wisconsin counterparts do not pocket 300 times more than ordinary workers. But what is your point? They make five to ten times more and inhabit a universe entirely different from workers who will be cutting back on food, doctor visits and other family expenses due to these concessions.

You conclude your letter: "And to think unions and socialists used to be on the same page. I've always backed socialism. Together with labor the team passed workers comp, unemployment insurance, and several other important worker protections."

It is true that socialists led the great class battles to form the industrial unions in the 1930s; however, the relationship between socialism and the trade unions has always been complex. Even during periods when the unions were able to win significant gains for the working class, they have generally had a tense and even hostile relationship with the socialist movement. This is because the unions, to the extent that they represented the interests of workers, did so entirely on the basis of accepting capitalist relations and securing for workers the highest price that could be obtained for the sale of their labor power.

In the United States, the tendency of trade unionism to subordinate the working class to capitalism took the political form, in the 1940s and 1950s, of a vicious anti-

communist purge in order to establish a labor movement that was thoroughly pro-capitalist and allied to the Democratic Party. The ability of the unions to win gains for the working class on this basis was very short-lived. As American capitalism entered its descent, beginning in the 1960s and accelerating in the 1980s, the unions shifted ever more openly into instruments for imposing concessions on the working class.

The outcome of that betrayal can be seen today, as the unions have been transformed into little more than business operations, led by corporate managers who share in the exploitation of the working class. They do everything they can to subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party, which is working with the Republican Party to impoverish workers and tear up education and social programs. In no sense can these organizations be referred to as workers organizations.

No socialist worth anything could support such organizations. That is why the SEP calls for workers to break with the unions and build new organizations of struggle, democratically controlled by the rank-and-file, and fighting to mobilize the working class to defend jobs, living standards and social programs against both corporate-backed parties and the profit system they defend.

Jerry White



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