

Firefighters speak out on Wisconsin struggle

Jerry White
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Hundreds of firefighters came to join the demonstrations of Wisconsin workers at the state capitol on Monday. The firefighters came from Madison, Janesville, Sheboygan, Milwaukee and other Wisconsin cities, and were joined by a delegation of 45 firefighters from Chicago, 125 miles away. They were blocked from entering the state capitol by police and marched around the building to protest the attack on public employees.

Since the onset of the struggle, firefighters have been in the forefront even though Governor Scott Walker has sought to divide the working class opposition by exempting them from his bill, which sharply increases the payment workers make towards their pension and health care benefits and restricts collective bargaining.

Several firefighters spoke with the *World Socialist Web Site* about what was at stake. Carl, a Janesville firefighter for the last three years, said, “My wife is a teacher who could face up to an 18 percent cut in pay; I’m a firefighter and I don’t know yet what we could lose.

“Then there is my daughter who is a student at the University of Wisconsin and she could face a 26 percent increase in tuition. How are young people supposed to stay in college?”

“I’ve got to work four jobs to make it. And they say city workers are making out like bandits—I don’t think so.

“If Walker gets this through, it’s going to be a domino effect across the country. It’s important that we fight this now before it’s passed. You can’t trust the deficit figures they use. The people they are messing with are the ones people who can’t do without. Who is going to collect the trash, answer the call for fire and emergency services or teach the children?

“My wife is concerned that with all the budget cuts class sizes are going to grow and kids are going to suffer,” Carl added.

“Walker is for the big money,” he continued. “You listen to the way he responded to the prank call [with a radio host posing as billionaire David Koch] when he laid his cards on the table. They want to create a society where there are only the rich and the poor. I’m proud to be a civil servant, and we are not going to leave until we stop this.”

Dan Cullen, who retired after 31 years of firefighting in Chicago, said, “Walker is backed by the Koch brothers and other billionaires. But it’s not just the Republicans. Obama has brought [former JPMorgan Chase bank executive] Bill Daley in as his White House chief of staff. This country is run by the incredibly rich. The working class has been hit since Ronald Reagan.

“Walker has manufactured this crisis. He’s given over \$140 million in tax cuts for big business. It’s like Rahm Emanuel, the new mayor of Chicago said: ‘Never let a good crisis go to waste.’ They’ve engineered this crisis to rip up everything workers have fought for.

“After the financial crash, the government said the executives at AIG and the Wall Street banks couldn’t take a haircut because of the ‘sanctity of a contract.’ But that doesn’t hold up for union contracts, just the corporations.

“Workers are being trampled by corporate interests, which control the Supreme Court, the state legislatures, everything. The little guy is going to have to fight for himself because no one else is.

“In Chicago people are facing desperate conditions already. We see people using their stoves to heat their homes after their utilities are shut off. The stove creates enormous moisture that settles in the walls creating black mold. There are infants and little children suffering from asthma because of that. [Former Chicago Mayor] Richard Daley’s friends made a ton of money, and he left an economic mess for Emanuel to

carry out draconian cuts.”

Kevin Johnson, a Chicago firefighter with five-and-a-half years, said, “In the early days of the labor movement the socialists were a counter-weight to the capitalists. They gave workers a voice. Over the last three decades they have been taking everything away from workers, bit by bit—no, actually its been disappearing in chunks. Workers don’t see the big picture yet, but Walker is just the beginning.

“We want to have something to say rather than having things rammed down our throats. They all say there are budget problems while they are slashing taxes for the rich. They expect us to pay for that. Anytime they do something wrong—like the financial crash—they expect us to pay for it.

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“Walker wants to return it to the 1920s. The money he has given to the rich is what they want to take away from the workers. These people won’t be satisfied until they take everything.

“The Democrats claim they are the party of labor. The Democrats are backing merit pay for teachers, charter schools, the whole thing the Republicans have been pushing for years. There is no choice for workers with these two parties.

“I was never sold on Obama. I figured he would be another Clinton. The truth is the biggest blows against labor have been carried out by the Democrats. One of the first things Obama did was stick it to the auto workers. He said their contracts and pay were too much and would have to be cut.

“When Rahm Emanuel came around to the fire houses in Chicago to get support, he told us point blank, ‘I’m going to do to you what I did to the UAW—you’ll have to pay for your pensions and benefits.’ What kind of Democrat is that? He is just another hatchet man.

“The union leaders have been co-opted too. They run a big business. You look at Andy Stern, the head of the Service Employees International Union. He is using a corporate model for the union, buying up smaller unions.”

Other public employees also spoke out. Doug Uren, a highway worker for 26 years, said, “They want to wipe out the guys who plow the ice and snow from the roads clearing the way for cars and emergency vehicles.

Public sector workers did not cause the budget crisis.

“They say there is no money, but trillions of dollars are being spent on two wars—and they are already positioning to intervene in Libya. I spent two years in Vietnam. We were told we were fighting communism. Later I found out there was a lot of oil off the coast of Vietnam. It’s the same thing with Iraq. It wasn’t about weapons of mass destruction—it was about oil.

“Milwaukee, where I grew up, has been hit hard. Allis Chalmers closed up, there are virtually no breweries left, and Chrysler closed its plants in Kenosha. This is a fight for all workers.”



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