

Ten thousand attend protest at Indiana statehouse

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Some 10,000 workers gathered outside the Indiana Statehouse in Indianapolis Thursday in a rally called by area unions to protest Republican-sponsored legislation attacking public sector collective bargaining and public education.

While the protest, titled "We Are Indiana," was one of the largest in over a decade, the turnout was far smaller than the record 20-30,000 predicted by union officials. The crowd included a delegation from Wisconsin who came to show solidarity with workers in Indiana. Also taking part were teachers, hotel workers, steel workers, state workers and building trades workers. A delegation from the National Football League Players Association also participated.

The state capitol has been the scene of daily protests for the past three weeks against legislation pending in the Indiana General Assembly that would limit collective bargaining by teachers to wage-related issues and a bill that would exempt projects of less than \$1,000,000 from the state's common construction wage, which sets minimum pay based on area wages.

Another proposed measure would institute a school voucher system allowing public funds to be spent for private education. Republicans say they have now dropped plans to enact right-to-work legislation, banning the collection of union dues from workers covered by a collective bargaining agreement who are not union members, in the current session.

Main speakers at the rally included Indiana AFL-CIO President Nancy Guyott and United Steelworkers International President Leo Gerard. Democratic state representative Bill Crawford, who returned from Illinois, was the only House member to speak. Democratic Senate Minority Leader Vi Simpson also spoke.

Union officials made no call for strike action or any

broader mobilization in opposition to legislation attacking public education and workplace rights. They limited their words to empty bombast combined with praise for Democratic members of the Indiana House, who left the state last month to deprive the Republican majority of the quorum needed to enact its legislative agenda. The Democratic legislators are currently staying in Urbana, Illinois. Republicans outnumber Democrats 60-40 in the Indiana House, but two thirds of legislators are required to be present to conduct any business. Thirty-seven House Democrats are currently in Illinois.

The rally came as House Democrats indicated that they are in talks with Republicans over their return to the capitol. Democratic state representative Patrick Bauer called the proposed Republican modifications to the school voucher bill "good progress" and indicated Democratic legislators could return in a "matter of days."

Currently, the voucher bill includes no cap on the number of students who can participate and a family of four making up to \$80,000 a year could receive state money to attend private school. A Republican sponsored amendment would cap income eligibility at \$60,000 for a family of four and limit participation to one percent the first year, two percent the second year with no limit after that.

In either case, the passage of this legislation opens the door to the gutting of public education as more and more funds are diverted to private, for profit, schools.

Still on the table is a bill that would limit collective bargaining rights of teachers to only wage related issues. Other issues related to working conditions, the school calendar, etc., would be excluded. The bill has passed the Republican-controlled Senate and is awaiting a hearing in the House.

Other Republican-sponsored legislation would have banned collective bargaining for all state employees. Currently state employees only have bargaining rights if those are granted by the governor. Indiana Republican Governor Mitch Daniels has not granted those rights, so passage of the bill would have no immediate impact. In any event, Republicans now say they will not enact the bill in this session.

Workers at the rally expressed their determination to continue the struggle.

Marisa Graham, a teacher from Anderson, Indiana, warned the crowd about the attacks on public education, “We are not greedy teachers or the privileged elite. We want our voice heard. Collective bargaining is our voice.”

Carletta Adams, a retired laborer attended the rally. She told local reporters, “They’re cutting back and cutting back. Pretty soon no one will be able to have a decent enough wage to support their households. You can only push so far.”



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