

Ohio senate passes anti-worker bill

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Late Wednesday evening the Ohio Senate approved a bill that outlaws government workers' right to strike and engage in collective bargaining, setting the stage for massive wage and benefit cuts. The bill, which would directly affect 360,000 workers and their families, is expected to pass the House and be signed into law by Governor John Kasich next week.

The bill has sparked significant resistance in Ohio. Tens of thousands have protested over the past two weeks, with the largest demonstrations taking place in Columbus, the capital and third-largest metropolitan area after Cleveland and Cincinnati. A demonstration there on Tuesday drew a crowd officially estimated at 8,500.

As Wednesday's vote moved forward in the Republican-controlled senate, it was clear there was not enough support among Republican senators to move it out of committee and to a floor vote. In response, the rules committee and the labor committee each removed a dissident Republican senator. After the bill passed the senate floor vote by a 17-16 margin, hundreds of protesters outside the Senate chambers shouted, "Shame on you" and "We'll remember this."

The anti-worker bill in Ohio is part of a broad ruling class offensive against government workers, and indeed the entire working class. At the national level, President Obama has ordered a multi-year freeze to the pay of federal workers and discretionary social spending. Democratic and Republican governors throughout the US are cutting pay for workers and gutting education and Medicaid, the health insurance program for the poor.

In Ohio, like Wisconsin, the state government is entirely in the hands of Republicans, and they are seizing the opportunity to attack the unions—a main constituency of the Democratic Party—and to dismantle

basic workplace rights. In addition to seeking immediate advantages over the Democrats in Ohio, the Republicans are aiming to strip working people of any legal means by which to defend themselves against far-reaching assaults on their living standards. In some ways, the legislative attack on workers in Ohio is more far-reaching than its sister bill in Wisconsin, which has drawn hundreds of thousands of people into struggle.

The Ohio bill would:

- * Ban the right to strike for all public employees, and enjoin agencies that employ public workers with the power to levy fines of twice the daily rate of pay. The bill also establishes a punishment of 30 days in jail and a \$1,000 fine for those who strike in defiance of injunctions.

- * Impose sharp pay cuts on government workers by forcing them to pay for 20 percent of their health care premiums.

- * All but end the right to collective bargaining. Among the sections of the working class that would effectively lose the right as a result of the bill are public school teachers, professors, policemen, firefighters, workers employed by state's regional councils, and workers hired through private contractors.

- * Drastically reduce what is subject to collective bargaining (for those workers who still have this "right" after the bill becomes law.) Subjects disallowed from bargaining would include health care, pensions, staffing levels, layoffs, privatizations, and, in most cases, wages. Furthermore, any collective bargaining agreement in place would be subject to the unilateral alteration of management in the case of financial emergency or even "fiscal watch." The bill would even remove as a subject of collective bargaining the continuation of collective bargaining!

The Ohio bill targets the financial sustenance of union bureaucracies less directly than the Wisconsin bill. It does not, for example, outlaw the automatic dues

check-off and force recertification elections each year, although a campaign is underway to have such provisions added to the bill in the House.

After the bill passed the senate Wednesday, the president of the AFL-CIO in Ohio issued a statement treating the measure as though it were already law, even though it must still be introduced in the House. AFL-CIO head Tim Burga called the bill's senate passage "a sad day for Ohio's middle class." He made no mention of further demonstrations against the bill, much less strikes in opposition to its passage.

The unions are far more fearful that serious resistance to the bill—including the possibility of a general strike—could emerge, than they are of losing their role in the contract negotiation process. With a large working class that has been hard hit by the decline of heavy industry—auto, steel, and tire production—there is enormous social anger in this state of 11.5 million, whose economy is larger than that of Sweden.



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