Several thousand demonstrate in Columbus, Ohio

Brad Sykes, Tom Eley
9 March 2011

Several thousand workers from around the state of Ohio rallied in front of the Ohio Statehouse in Columbus Tuesday in opposition to the anti-worker Senate Bill 5. The demonstration was timed to coincide with the State of the State address delivered by Republican Governor John Kasich, the legislation's prime backer.

Security was again tight at the rally, with numerous Columbus police officers patrolling the grounds on horseback, and several Ohio Highway Patrol officers standing guard at the Statehouse doors, only allowing a select few in from time to time. Shouts, catcalls, and chants from the demonstrators were said to be audible from inside the Statehouse as Kasich delivered his speech.

Senate Bill 5, which passed the Ohio Senate last week by a vote of 17-16, and is now being debated in the Ohio House of Representatives, is an unprecedented attack on Ohio's 360,000 public workers. The legislation, among other things, would ban the right of government workers to strike on pain of imprisonment and fines; eliminate contractual patterns for wage increases; place total authority for hiring, firing and outsourcing in the hands of public sector managers; impose large wage and salary cuts on government workers by forcing them to pay for 20 percent of their health care premiums; and deny any collective bargaining rights to teachers, professors, policemen, firefighters, and workers hired through private contractors.

Speeches to the rally made by union officials demonstrated the bureaucracy's bankrupt perspective and its fundamental hostility to the interests of the workers it nominally represents. As in Wisconsin, Ohio "labor leaders" repeat that they fully support cutting workers' wages and benefits—they only oppose the Republican Party's attempt to push them out of their traditional role of imposing the cuts.

No speaker raised the possibility of a general strike, much less issued a call to break with both the Republican and Democratic big business parties. The workers in attendance were told to "fight for their rights" and "win the war," but speakers did not raise the obvious question of how this could be done—beyond appealing for mercy from the very same politicians imposing the cuts.

The president of the International Association of Fire Fighters, Harold A. Schaitberger, criticized some of the policies pushed by Governor Kasich, and made vague threats such as "either stand with the people or against us—we will make you pay." More revealing was a comment indicating that the union bureaucracy has already dropped its opposition to the law. Kasich "may win the battle, but we will win the war," Schaitberger said. The bill, at that point, had not even passed the lower house.

The comment was in keeping with what appears to be an effort by the AFL-CIO in Ohio to shut down demonstrations and to block any broad appeal against savage budget-cutting that will affect the overwhelming majority of the state's 11.5 million people. On Wednesday after the legislation passed the Ohio Senate, state AFL-CIO head Tim Burga issued a statement all but acceding to the bill's passage, calling it a "sad day for the middle class."

Tuesday's demonstration was considerably smaller than that which took place one week earlier, which drew between 8,500 and 20,000, according to various estimates.

Two factors are at play in union officials' decision to stem demonstrations. Unlike in Wisconsin, the bill

© World Socialist Web Site

pushed by Kasich does not directly attack the financial basis of the unions—the automatic dues check-off. (The bill pushed by Wisconsin governor Scott Walker would abolish the dues check-off and force unions to carry on recertification elections each year.) In Ohio, public sector unions would exist, but would have virtually no function.

Of far greater concern to the union bureaucracy is the emergence of the sort of independent initiative of workers and youth that have pulled hundreds of thousands into struggle in Wisconsin. In Ohio—hard hit by the economic crisis and with many millions of workers and urban poor—such a development could easily escape the control of the trade unions and the Democratic Party.

As has been the case in Wisconsin and at previous demonstrations in Ohio, the anger of workers and youth at Tuesday's rally and their determination to defend their living standards was in marked contrast to the union speakers.

Jason Taylor, a produce clerk and member of the International Union of Food Workers from Mansfield, Ohio, stated that the conditions of working families throughout Ohio is "horrible" and that there had to be greater solidarity among all parts of the working class.

Jim Reese, a Columbus attorney and small business owner, spoke of the attacks on all workers in the US, citing as examples "obscene" gas prices, rising mortgage payments, and unaffordable health care premiums. "If you experience any of these things, you are a member of the working class," he said.

Diane is a retired Columbus public school teacher who still tutors part-time in the district. "Why would anyone want to go into teaching if this bill passes?" she asked. "I taught for 30 years and I wouldn't recommend it to my worst enemy now. With wages capped and seniority being eliminated, as well as the right to collectively bargain things like limits in class size—this is absolutely going to kill public education."

Alec Johnson of Columbus said he would support a general strike. When presented with the fact that the trade union officials have made no such calls for such action, he responded, "eventually the workers will figure out that the big business parties don't care about them, and they'll get mad as hell."

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site