

Wisconsin's anti-worker law: An historic attack on the working class

Tom Eley
11 March 2011

The Wisconsin Assembly's passage of a bill that will strip collective bargaining rights and cut wages and benefits for nearly 200,000 public sector workers marks a giant step toward the open dictatorship of the banks and corporations.

The approval of the anti-worker bill came the day after Republicans pushed it through the State Senate in a secretive, and likely illegal, legislative maneuver. In order to avoid a two-thirds quorum requirement to hold any vote related to state spending, senate Republicans stripped the legislation of its fiscal measures. The bill will likely be signed into law by Governor Scott Walker on Friday.

Among its many reactionary provisions, the law will force workers to double contributions to their health care and retirement funds, resulting in drastic pay cuts of 8 percent, and in some cases 20 percent. This is just the beginning of what promises to be a relentless assault on workers' wages and benefits.

The law includes a number of features designed to criminalize any attempt by workers to resist future wage-cutting. In addition to its proscription of collective bargaining for almost all public-sector workers, including those at the municipal and county level, a provision in the bill grants the governor the ability to unilaterally fire striking workers by declaring "a state of emergency."

Under the title "Discharge of State Employees," the law states, "The Governor may issue an executive order declaring a state of emergency for the state or any portion of the state if he or she determines that an emergency resulting from a disaster or imminent threat of a disaster exists." Acting through an appointed body, the governor could then fire any employee who does not "(a) report to work for any three days during the state of emergency, (b) participates in a strike, work stoppage, sit-down, stay-in, slowdown, or other concerted activities to interrupt the operations or services of state government."

This language is yet another signal that the epoch of class compromise in the US has come to a definitive end. Ruling layers are attempting to turn back the clock to the nineteenth century and the most savage exploitation of the working class.

The struggle to establish legal industrial unions, representing

entire occupations and industries rather than particular crafts, and to secure the right to negotiate with employers collectively rather than as isolated individuals, spanned 60 years and encompassed the most bitter and bloody strikes.

From the eruption of the Great Railway Strike of 1877 to the Flint sit-down strikes of 1937, workers' struggles often assumed an insurrectionary character owing to the intransigence of some of the world's most powerful corporations. These included monumental strikes such as Pullman, Homestead, Lawrence, and the Great Steel Strike of 1919, and the bloody conflicts at Haymarket, Ludlow, Calumet, and Republic Steel, to name a few.

Government ruled by injunction, declaring unions and strikes to be illegal "combinations" of workers. When this failed, savage violence was the preferred method. Working class leaders were regularly imprisoned, executed, or beaten and lynched. Thousands died at the hands of the Pinkertons, scabs, thugs, police, and state militias. Nowhere else in the world was the struggle for unionization so raw and brutal as in the US.

Finally in the 1930s, with the eruption of the great general strikes in 1934 in San Francisco, Minneapolis and Toledo, and especially with the sit-down strike in Flint in 1936 and 1937, the principle of union legality and collective bargaining was established, and the ferocious violence of the great corporations restrained.

The long post-World War II expansion of American capitalism laid the basis for several decades of class compromise, to be overseen by the AFL and CIO bureaucracies and their modern theory of collective bargaining. In return for the acceptance of the unions by the corporations and the state, workers were to give up any ideas of fundamental social change. The Taft-Hartley Act of 1947 and the anti-communist purges of the unions ensured a docile labor bureaucracy that would take as its guiding principle the defense of the profitability of American capitalism.

The viability of this perspective was short-lived. By the 1970s and 1980s, with the rapid decline of American capitalism relative to its rivals, the ruling class began a ruthless offensive against workers. The pact that the AFL-CIO had made with capitalism translated into its active participation in this attack. Beginning with Reagan's smashing of the air traffic controllers in the PATCO

strike of 1981, the union bureaucracy consciously acted to isolate and smother strikes, including at Phelps Dodge, Greyhound, Hormel and AT Massey, among many others.

The betrayals of the unions resulted in an historically unprecedented situation: from the 1990s until today, strikes virtually disappeared from the American industrial landscape. The decline of open class struggle, artificially repressed, coincided with a surge of inequality, as the American financial aristocracy accumulated enormous wealth through the decimation of industry and the conditions of the working class.

The attack in Wisconsin on government workers, and their bitter resistance, shows that this process has reached a new stage.

The turn toward dictatorial methods arises not primarily from the personal characteristics of Walker, or even from the Republican Party for that matter, but from the advanced crisis of American capitalism, which has eviscerated any basis for compromise between the classes. The crisis that erupted in 2008 has provided the occasion to merge the destruction of democratic rights—intensified in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks—with the attack on working class living standards. This is clear in both the form and the content of the Wisconsin bill: a law stripping workers of basic rights could only have been passed in a flagrantly anti-democratic way.

In the face of this attack, the AFL-CIO unions are only an impediment to workers. From the time Walker proposed his bill almost one month ago, their entire strategy was to avoid the passage of its attack on union dues requirements by agreeing to all of its demands for financial concessions from workers. In other words, the unions sought to keep the legal fiction of collective bargaining—and thus their financial sustenance—by abandoning it in practice.

The impotent and cowardly strategy of the establishment unions is closely tied to their support for the Democratic Party, which is carrying out attacks no less severe than those contained in Walker's budget in California, New York and other states. As for the Obama administration and the Democrats in the US Congress, they are working with Republicans to cut billions in social services.

The attack on all public-sector workers' rights and wages requires a response-in-kind—a general strike, a demand that is already winning broad support. The determined resistance to Walker will win broad support from the entire working class, which is being subjected to vicious wage-and-benefit-cutting in the private sector, and which will be ravaged by Walker's proposed two-year budget and its cuts to education and health care.

The union bureaucracy opposes such a course of action far more than it opposes Walker's bill. In the immediate aftermath of its passage in the senate on Wednesday night, the leaders of Wisconsin's two largest public sector unions, Mary Bell of the

Wisconsin Education Association Council, and Marty Beil of the Wisconsin State Employees Union, indicated their acceptance of the bill and told workers not to strike. "I ask Wisconsin's educators to be at work tomorrow," Bell said, the only demand she made during her brief remarks. The no-strike order was repeated by teachers' unions in the state's two largest school districts, Milwaukee and Madison. Unions of teaching assistants at the University of Wisconsin campuses in the two cities also said they had no plans to schedule a strike vote.

Now the unions declare that the only means of defending workers is through supporting "recall efforts," as Beil put it, to replace eight Republican senators with Democrats. This gambit, even should it work to remove a handful of Republican legislators, would in no way reverse the wage cuts or the draconian state budget, which the Democrats support. The real aim of this maneuver, as was the case with the Democratic senators' flight from the state, is to defuse the growing militancy of the workers and youth.

It is urgently necessary that leadership of the struggle in Wisconsin be taken out of the hands of the unions, the Democratic Party and their allies. Independent rank-and-file committees must be formed in workplaces to popularize the call for a general strike and make preparations. The aim of such a strike must be the removal of Walker and the rejection of every one of his proposals.

The events in Wisconsin pose the basic question of the organization of society. Will the economy be organized to meet needs of the population? Or will it continue to be subject to the financial aristocracy's relentless drive for personal enrichment, and the dictatorship that must inevitably follow?

For the working class to defend its social rights—for good jobs, quality education, health care, pensions and housing—a new political perspective is required that rejects the "right" to massive personal fortunes of the rich.

The *World Socialist Web Site*, Socialist Equality Party and the International Students for Social Equality are hosting a conference in Ann Arbor, Michigan on April 9-10, The Fight for Socialism Today, as part of a series of conferences throughout the US. This conference will be devoted to organizing a fight-back and building a new political leadership to carry the emerging struggle of the working class to victory. We call on workers and youth in Madison and throughout the US to make plans to attend today.

Tom Eley

For more information and to register, click here.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact