

Political lessons of the battle of Wisconsin

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Today marks two weeks since Wisconsin Republicans used a maneuver of dubious legality to approve Governor Scott Walker's "budget repair" bill and strip nearly 375,000 teachers, nurses, city workers and other public employees of their collective bargaining rights, while imposing deep cuts in take-home pay.

Walker's signing of the bill into law two days later, on March 11, was seized on as the occasion for state and national unions to call off the month-long battle in Wisconsin, which had seen the biggest eruption of working class struggle in the US in three decades. From mid-February to mid-March, hundreds of thousands of workers and young people were involved in mass demonstrations, job actions by teachers, walkouts by high school and college students, and the occupation of the state Capitol building in Madison.

The new law is part of a nationwide attack on public employees being carried out by both Democrats and Republicans as they impose austerity measures aimed at making the working class pay for the economic crisis. Workers are being stripped of the right to bargain collectively and strike as part of a drive to criminalize all forms of collective working class resistance.

Last week, a Dane County, Wisconsin judge issued a temporary restraining order delaying the implementation of the bill pending a ruling on whether Republicans violated the state's Open Meetings law when they hurriedly convened to pass the measure on the evening of March 9.

In the meantime, local affiliates of the state's two largest unions—the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC)—have used the delay to sign scores of contract extensions before the new law goes into effect.

Far from opposing Walker's cuts, the unions have written into the contracts the governor's demand that

workers double what they pay for health care premiums and cover half the cost of their pensions. In return for the concessions, city and school authorities have agreed to continue deducting union dues from workers' paychecks—a provision prohibited under Walker's law but only after the current contracts expire.

With rising costs for food, gas, higher education and other family expenditures, the concessions will have a wrenching impact on public workers, who have already been hit with years of wage freezes and furloughs imposed by Walker's Democratic predecessor, Governor Jim Doyle. The average worker stands to lose around \$4,000 a year, according to University of Wisconsin economist Steven Deller.

In several cases, the unions agreed to even deeper cuts than Walker demanded, including in Green Bay, where they accepted pay cuts for teachers and a sharp increase in the number of students in their classrooms.

These punitive contracts are consistent with the position the unions took throughout the month-long struggle. Within days of the outbreak of protests—which were not initiated by the unions, but emerged chiefly outside of them—the leaders of AFSCME and WEAC declared they were willing to accept deep wage and benefit concessions, making a mockery of their claim to be defending collective bargaining rights.

While workers fought with enormous determination to defend their bargaining rights—in order to defend their jobs and living standards—the union bureaucrats made it clear their only concern was preserving their own institutional interests, above all, their dues income. In exchange for this, they promised "labor peace" and full cooperation in forcing workers to pay for the economic crisis caused by the criminal activities of the corporate and financial elite.

Throughout the struggle, the unions worked together with the Democratic politicians to contain the movement, limit it to protest action and oppose

growing demands for a general strike of all Wisconsin workers.

When thousands descended on the state Capitol on the night of March 9 to oppose the passage of the bill—and chants rang out in the rotunda for a general strike—union officials urged calm and then instructed teachers and other public employees to report to work the next day.

In order to conceal their capitulation to Walker and dissipate opposition, union officials told workers to shift their efforts to a campaign to recall Republican legislators and replace them with Democrats. This is under conditions where the Democrats have made it clear they have no opposition to Walker's concessions demands or the \$1.5 billion in social spending cuts contained in his budget. In fact, the Democrats boasted that they had carried out the deepest cuts in state history prior to Walker.

On a national scale, the Obama administration has spearheaded the assault on auto workers, teachers and federal employees and is collaborating with the Republicans to slash social spending in order to pay for tax cuts to the rich and the Wall Street bailout. Democratic governors in California, New York, Illinois and other states are carrying out attacks on public employees and deep cuts in social programs.

The difference is that the Democrats seek to carry out these attacks with the assistance of the labor bureaucracy, while the Republicans seek to cripple and marginalize the unions. In exchange for the unions' services in suppressing working class opposition, the Democratic Party has protected the legal position and financial interests of the labor bureaucracy. The unions, in turn, provide the Democratic Party with funds and manpower for their electoral campaigns and constitute an important part of the party apparatus.

The experience in Wisconsin reveals that the conflict of social interests is not just between the working class and the Republicans, but between the working class on the one side and the unions and both big business parties on the other. The unions and the Democrats are pursuing interests diametrically opposed to the most basic needs of the workers.

Workers' social rights—the right to a decent-paying and secure job, quality schools, health care, housing and a comfortable retirement—are incompatible with the maintenance of the existing economic system. The

crisis of American and world capitalism underlies the turn by the ruling elite to class war policies.

The unions and the Democratic Party defend this failed system, and therefore insist that the burden of its crisis be placed on the backs of the workers. To fight back, the working class must mount an industrial and political struggle against the profit system and all of its political representatives.

During the month-long battle in Wisconsin, the working class began to manifest its immense capacity for struggle, sacrifice and solidarity. After more than three decades in which the class struggle was artificially suppressed by the unions, the American working class announced its return to the historical stage and demonstrated its revolutionary potential.

In order to rally its social power, however, the working class must break the stranglehold of the trade unions and build new, genuinely democratic organizations of struggle in the factories and job locations and in the communities. Above all, workers must break with the Democratic Party and build a mass socialist movement as the political alternative to the two parties of big business and the capitalist system they defend.

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