Behind the sellout of the struggle in Wisconsin

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The executives who run Wisconsin's public sector unions have responded to the passage of Governor Scott Walker's anti-worker bill by rushing to put in place contracts that impose all of the bill's demands for financial concessions on the state's 375,000 teachers, nurses, city workers and other public employees.

The officials are doing so because contracts that begin before the law goes into effect are exempt from the requirement that public sector unions hold annual recertification elections and the elimination of automatic dues deduction from workers' paychecks.

In other words, the union executives are moving swiftly to protect their own financial sustenance, while imposing draconian pay and benefit cuts inspired by the Walker bill. These include a sharp increase in worker contributions to insurance and retirement costs, which amounts to a $4,000 cut in annual take-home pay for the average public employee.

This reveals the fundamentally opposed interests of workers, on the one side, and the union apparatus and entire political establishment on the other.

A partial analysis of union financial filings with the Internal Revenue Service and the Department of Labor demonstrates the class chasm separating workers—who earn an average $51,000 a year—from the union officials who purport to represent them.

In reviewing the figures one should keep in mind that the listed salaries are augmented by thousands, if not tens of thousands, more in expense accounts, perks, salaries of spouses and other family members also on the union payroll and compensation from other positions on union, corporate or government bodies.

* Marty Beil, executive director of the Wisconsin Public Employees Union (WPEU), took home nearly $162,000 in 2008, the last year for which documents are available. At least five other WPEU executives made upwards of $100,000.

* The state American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees management boasts 19 members who made more than $100,000 in 2009, including chief executive Rick Badger, who made $133,000.

* Gerald McEntee, the national president of AFSCME, pocketed almost $480,000 in 2009, according the Center for Public Integrity.

* Mary Bell's Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) union distributed the most to its non-elected staff. Bell took home $173,466 in 2008, according to the WEAC's IRS 990 form. She was second among union management. Executive Director Dan Burkhalter was paid $242,807. Four other executives were paid nearly $190,000, and another was given $165,112.

* WEAC's parent organization, the National Education Association, has 31 headquarters officers and employees who earn more than $200,000 in pay and benefits. The president, Dennis Van Roekel, received $397,721 in salary and benefits.

* Rose Ann De Moro, the executive director of National Nurses United, who was brought to Wisconsin to promote "progressive" unionism—and who has been heavily promoted by the pseudo-left International Socialist Organization—makes $293,000 per year. Her family income totals $435,000 if you add the salary of her husband, Robert, a "researcher" for the same organization.

* AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka made at least $283,340 last year; American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten made $620,000 from two jobs in the same union. There are literally thousands of union officials who make over $100,000 per year, and, as of 2008, almost 100 who took home more than $400,000.

These are the corporate managers of the unions whose businesses and personal finances are doing quite well even as their dues-paying "members" suffer devastating wage and benefit cuts that will result in

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personal bankruptcies, broken families and home foreclosures.

This layer of the well-heeled upper middle class constitutes a major component of the Democratic Party, which is itself carrying out enormous cuts to the pay and benefits of public sector workers at the federal level under Obama and in states like Illinois, California and New York.

The difference is that the Democrats rely on the unions to force the cuts on workers, while the Republicans would discard the unions altogether. The Democrats protect the unions' financial interests—not those of the workers they nominally represent—and, in turn, the unions suppress working class opposition to austerity measures and funnel to the Democrats millions in worker dues and "get out the vote" campaigns every two and four years.

To draw the point out more clearly, it is necessary to briefly review what took place in Wisconsin.

Walker's reactionary piece of legislation had triggered, beginning in the last two weeks of February, one of the biggest struggles of the American working class in decades. Tens of thousands of teachers from across the state engaged in a "sick-out," a de facto strike wave that shut down scores of schools. Dozens of high schools and colleges were hit by student walkouts. Hundreds of thousands demonstrated in Madison over the period, and growing numbers of workers were demanding a general strike.

Soon after the Senate's passage of the bill on March 9, courtesy of legally dubious legislative maneuvering, the state's union executives immediately demanded that workers stay on the job. Put your faith in the recall campaign against a handful of Republican senators, workers and youth were told. To justify calling off the struggle, they pointed to the Democratic senators who had slowed passage of the law by fleeing to Illinois—but who were about to capitulate prior to Walker's maneuver, as their own e-mails reveal.

Instead of calling forward the massive working class opposition that existed, the unions began a mad rush to impose all the financial concessions Walker was demanding—and more—before the law went into effect. This period has been extended by the temporary restraining order on the law put in place by a Dane County judge.

On March 12, the union "representing" Madison teachers imposed a two-year wage freeze and pension contribution increases roughly equivalent to a $3,200 pay cut this year alone for the average teacher, according to the *Wisconsin State Journal*. On March 15, Local 60 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) agreed to a deal with the city of Madison imposing $2.8 million in cuts on workers it nominally represents, including increases in pension contributions in line with Walker's demands.

According to an Associated Press article, "Wisconsin Unions Rush Deals Ahead of Bargaining Law," within two days of passage of the law as many as 100 unions concluded concessions deals with local school districts, negotiations having begun for most in late February when Walker first introduced his bill. "The vast majority of the [new contracts] include benefit concessions consistent with what Walker proposed under the new collective bargaining law," said Bob Butler, an attorney for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards.

Why have the unions rushed through the concessions demanded by the Walker bill after the bitter struggle in Madison, and even before the law goes into effect?

As the union executives made clear again and again, they agreed to all the financial demands being made of workers. "I remind you that weeks ago we accepted the financial concessions the governor asked for to help solve our state's budget crisis," Wisconsin Education Association Council head Mary Bell wrote in a March 14 article for the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

What the union executives opposed was the bill's attack on their financial sustenance in its abolition of the automatic dues-check off. Hence the rush to put in place new union contracts before the law goes into effect.

This underscores the fact that workers are not just pitted against Walker and the Republicans, but the unions and the Democrats.

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