

Wisconsin governor to announce \$1 billion in budget cuts

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Governor Scott Walker of the US state of Wisconsin will announce \$1 billion dollars in budget cuts over the next two years in a speech before a joint session of the state legislature at 4 p.m. this afternoon.

The draconian cuts to state, local and municipal services will hit public education the hardest, eliminating \$900 million for kindergarten through 12th grade instruction. Walker will also impose severe cuts on Medicaid, the health care program for the poor.

The budget cuts are galvanizing popular opposition to the Republican governor, who is also seeking the destruction of the living standards and workplace rights of the state's 175,000 teachers, nurses and other public employees. Over the last two weeks, nearly 300,000 public and private sector workers and youth have been engaged in daily protests at the state capitol in Madison against Walker's "budget repair" bill.

Walker told a Madison television station, "Overall there will be over a billion dollars cut when it comes to schools, local governments across the board."

Walker declared that today would be the deadline for the passage of his bill because his plan to restructure \$165 million in state debt must get the approval of bond traders and credit-rating agencies. Walker has threatened to lay off 1,500 state workers immediately—and up to 12,000 state, local and school employees later—if the bill is not passed.

Under the bill most public employees would be forced to pay half their pension costs—5.8 percent of pay for state workers—and at least 12 percent of their health care costs. This would amount to a monthly pay cut of hundreds of dollars for state workers who have already suffered years of concessions and furloughs under Walker's Democratic and Republican predecessors.

Walker also wants to gut collective bargaining rights by restricting negotiations to wages only and limiting pay increases to the rate of inflation unless approved by a referendum. The automatic deduction of union dues would be ended, and unions would be required to hold annual votes to retain representation of a bargaining unit.

The governor told a local television station that the passage of his bill was essential because it would give local governments and school districts the ability to cut public employee costs in order to adjust their budgets to the cuts he is proposing. He made it clear that contracts that had already been signed—including for 8,000 teachers and support staff in the Milwaukee public schools—should be reopened and "modified."

A Janesville, Wisconsin firefighter summed up the impact of the planned cuts on his family, telling the WWS, "My wife is a teacher who could face up to an 18 percent cut in pay. I'm a firefighter and I don't know yet what we could lose. Then there is my daughter who is a student at the University of Wisconsin, and she could face a 26 percent increase in tuition. I've got to work four jobs to make it. They're saying city workers are making out like bandits—I don't think so." (See, "Firefighters speak out on Wisconsin struggle")

While rank-and-file workers oppose these attacks, the leaders of the two largest unions—the Wisconsin Educational Association Council and the Wisconsin Public Employees Union—have already accepted all of Walker's economic demands. The only concern the union officials have is preserving the legal status to negotiate the concessions and collect union dues.

Rick Badger, executive director of American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees Council 40—said his members would accept concessions. "If the governor would sit down with us, we could resolve all this," he told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

The unions have been collaborating with state Democrats who have distanced themselves from Walker's attack on the legal status of the unions. For their part, the Democrats, who agree that workers' living standards and public services must be sacrificed to pay for state budget deficits, believe this can best be achieved by collaborating with the unions—not by destroying them.

In comments to the National Governor's Association yesterday President Obama made a tepid criticism of

infringements on the rights of public employees, while solidarizing himself with the attack on their wages and benefits, and social spending in general. The president boasted that he had frozen the salaries of federal workers for two years and stated, "I believe that everybody should be prepared to give up something in order to solve our budget challenges. I think most public servants agree with that. Democrats and Republicans agree with that."

While the Democrats, Republicans and union executives agree, the struggle by workers and youth in Wisconsin is an expression of the overwhelming opposition to budget cuts throughout the country. There is a growing recognition that the working class is not responsible for the crisis of the states and should not pay for the criminal activities of the financial elite, which precipitated the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression.

State Democrats, who have blocked the passage of Walker's bill by boycotting the State Senate, have already signaled that they are ready to return to Madison, ostensibly to prevent public employee layoffs and to secure the support of bond traders to refinance the state's debt. The bill passed the Assembly 51-17 on Friday and can pass the Senate only if at least one Democrat returns to vote.

State Democrats, along with the union officials, are working diligently to wind down the protests while seeking a deal with a small number of Republicans willing to break with Walker. One Republican senator, Dale Schultz, has put forward a "compromise" bill that would include all the cuts and would suspend collective bargaining for two years.

On Sunday night, Democratic State Representative Brett Hulsey tried unsuccessfully to get protesters to leave the state capitol, which has been the symbolic center of the struggle. Some 600 workers and young people remained and forced capitol police to back down on their threat to arrest anyone defying the deadline to evacuate the building.

On Monday, however, the capitol was put under lockdown—in preparation for Walker's budget-cutting speech today—and police prevented more demonstrators from entering. Sleeping bags, blankets, mattresses and other items protestors needed were barred from the building, and preparations were being made to drive everyone out. A journalist said police deleted video she had taken inside the capitol.

Hundreds of demonstrators, including firefighters from around Wisconsin and from Chicago, gathered outside the doors of the capitol, shouting "Let us in" and "This is our house." As the afternoon continued, hundreds of workers gathered outside the capitol at an open microphone to listen to details about the situation inside the building and other speakers.

Addressing the crowd, a speaker from the Socialist

Equality Party explained the political issues confronting the working class and the SEP's program to fight the attack on public employees and the slashing of social services.

The SEP speaker noted that the struggle in Wisconsin marked the reemergence of the working class as a powerful force after three decades in which the corporations, backed by the Democrats and Republicans, had carried out a one-sided class war. "In Governor Walker," he said, "workers are facing a representative of the most ruthless sections of big business who want to turn the clock back to the 1920s."

But Walker was not alone, the speaker said. Both Democrats and Republicans agreed that the working class had to pay for the bailout of the Wall Street swindlers who triggered the crisis. "Three years after the crash, the financial and corporate elite are doing better than ever."

Several workers reacted with anger at the mention of Obama's attack on federal workers and teachers and expressed their agreement with the speaker's insistence that the Democrats, just as much as the Republicans, were the enemies of the working class.

It was a lie to claim that there was no money to pay for schools and decent wages and benefits for public employees, the speaker said, adding that workers should reject the demands for concessions and cuts in social programs. He noted that the union officials had already accepted Walker's economic demands and were interested only in defending the dues check-off system and their position as negotiators of givebacks.

The speaker concluded by saying that the working class needed to revive the powerful socialist traditions of the past in order to defend itself. "The ill-gotten gains of the financial oligarchs must be confiscated," he said, "so the wealth created by the working class could be used to meet social needs, not private profit."



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