

Wisconsin workers continue protests as Democrats prepare surrender to Walker

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Tens of thousands of workers and young people are expected to protest in Madison and other cities throughout Wisconsin today in opposition to Governor Scott Walker's attack on the wages and workplace rights of public employees and his proposal to cut \$1.7 billion from public education, health care and other essential services.

Demonstrations over the last three weeks have drawn workers from Wisconsin and many other states and have made Madison a symbol of working class resistance throughout the country. Among workers there is a growing sense that the intransigence of the Walker administration—and the corporate interests behind it—must be answered in kind. Sentiment for a general strike is broadly felt.

“We have to stand together or we are going to die together,” John Torgerson, a retired postal worker, told the WSW. “Walker and the rest of the politicians are saying there is no money—that’s because it’s all going to the big shots. How far down the ladder can we go? My daughter-in-law is a teacher, and she got a pink slip. She and my son have three kids and are going to lose \$30,000 in income.

“A general strike would hit them in the pocket book. That’s all the rich understand. My dad took part in the 1971 US postal strike that shut the entire nation down. The government tried to use the National Guard but that didn’t work. Things have been going downhill ever since Reagan fired the air traffic controllers in 1981.

“We had to fight for every right. How many people had to die to win the 40-hour workweek or to get

medical insurance? Now they would like to pay every worker five dollars a day.”

Another worker said, “A general strike, that is the only way to stop Walker.”

While there has been no let-up in the determination of workers, behind the scenes the unions and state Democrats are preparing to cave in to Walker. Over the last several days Senate Democrats—who left the state on February 17 to postpone a vote on the so-called Budget Repair bill—have been negotiating a deal with Walker that would allow the passage of the anti-worker measure.

Late Thursday night, Senator Bob Jauch (D-Poplar) said he no longer believed Democrats would be able to persuade two more Republicans to join Dale Schultz (R-Richland Center) to block the bill in the Senate. “In order to kill this bill we could never go home. That’s not practical and most people realize it,” Jauch told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

While pressing ahead with all of the attacks on workers’ wages and bargaining rights, the newspaper reported, Walker was considering dropping the provision that would require unions to win a vote of 51 percent of their members every year to be recertified.

The *Journal Sentinel* continued: “Assembly Minority Leader Peter Barca (D-Kenosha) said he came away from a meeting with Walker on Thursday with hope that an agreement could be reached. He said Walker was talking to Senate Democrats and understood the two sides needed to come up with a ‘win-win’ solution to bring them back.”

In other words, the Democrats and the trade unions are preparing a dirty deal—which they will call a victory—in order to call off the struggle on the basis of a

complete surrender to Walker's demands.

The two largest state worker unions—the Wisconsin Education Association Council and Wisconsin Public Employees Union (AFSCME)—have already agreed to all of Walker's economic demands, which will slash some \$30 million from workers' paychecks in the form of sharp increases in co-pays for health care and pensions.

Like the Democratic Party, the union officials agree that the working class must pay for the bankruptcy of the state governments, which is the result of the economic meltdown caused by the criminal activities of the Wall Street speculators and the massive tax cuts for the rich.

From the beginning, the unions have sought to limit the struggle to protecting their legal status to negotiate concessions—and collect union dues. They have promised to work with Walker to “balance the budget” by imposing further attacks on the workers they ostensibly represent.

But Walker and the corporate forces behind him are not interested in negotiating. Instead they see the destruction of bargaining rights as fundamental to their plans to cut \$834 million from public schools over the next two years and \$96 million in aid to local governments next year. They want to criminalize all organized resistance by the working class.

On Friday, Walker notified public employee unions he would lay off 1,500 state workers by April 1 if the Budget Repair bill was not passed in the next 15 days. Without the passage of the bill, the governor has said, another 12,000 state and municipal jobs would be cut by mid-2013.

Supporters of the SEP distributed the statement “Walker must go! For a general strike in Wisconsin!” and spoke with protesters about the issue.

Inside the state capitol, Laurie Meinholz, a college student from Iowa, said, “This bill is really cutting people off at the knees; people who are working their butts off are being forced to accept cuts to their wages and benefits. It's taking from those who are already struggling to pay for tax breaks for the wealthy. This is really going backwards, but there wouldn't be a budget problem if we would just tax the rich. My dad told me, ‘If you want to know what's going on, follow the money.’ And I believe him now more than ever. Money is used to buy policies, and it's scary.

“I like the idea [of a general strike], but I'm worried about how long it would take and who it would affect. People already can't make ends meet and don't have any time off, but all we have to bargain with is our labor.”

Outside the capitol, Hannah, a 30-year-old Madison high school teacher, said, “A general strike is the only peaceful solution possible. We need to get rid of this undemocratic bill. Teachers have talked a little about a general strike,” she said, but “we're concerned about disrupting our students' education.”

SEP supporters took up this question with several workers. While the media, union officials and corporate-backed politicians would hypocritically denounce striking public workers for disrupting essential services, in reality a mass struggle is the only way to defend these services from destructive budget cutting measures being planned by Walker, with the support of the Democrats.

Hannah went on to describe conditions faced by teachers and students that make such a struggle absolutely necessary. “I'm already putting about \$1,000 of my own salary back into my classroom each year to buy posters, maps, and books that my students need but the school can't afford. My classroom only had 30 books, but I have 34 students. I used my own money to buy four more books for those four students. And the books we have are for classroom use only—kids can't even take books home to study. Many kids are on free and reduced lunch, over 60 percent in some schools. I spend about \$200 a year on granola bars and fruit snacks to bring in for kids who are hungry.”

With regard to benefit cuts, she said, “Because I've only been teaching for a few years, these benefit changes are going to amount to a 20 percent pay cut for me. If this passes, I won't be able to pay my rent. I'm going to have to move back in with my parents. But I'm really worried about teachers with kids. A 20 percent cut for them will be devastating.” She added, “Eliminating capital gains taxes while enforcing cuts in workers' wages is outrageous.”



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