

Wisconsin unions rush to impose concessions before new law takes effect

Tobin Reese
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In the wake of the passage of an historic law attacking the collective bargaining rights of public workers in Wisconsin, unions throughout the state are scrambling to sign concessionary contract extensions before the law formally goes into effect on March 25.

The concessions are part of an effort on the part of the unions and the Democratic Party to suppress mass opposition to Walker's attack on public workers and the brutal spending cuts in his proposed budget, which slashes public education alone by \$900 million.

By demobilizing the month-long wave of mass protests—and collaborating in the destruction of their members' living standards—the union officials are seeking to demonstrate to Walker and the Republicans that it is better to keep them around to assure “labor peace” as his budget cutting measures go through.

Democratic Secretary of State Douglas La Follette decided to wait the full ten days to publish Walker's bill—a prerequisite for it to become law—in order to give the unions time to negotiate the givebacks with school boards and municipalities and preserve the narrow institutional interests of the labor bureaucracy. In most cases, the contract extensions allow for the continued deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks—something Walker's bill prohibits—but not until existing agreements expire.

On Tuesday, the Democratic mayor of Madison, Dave Cieslewicz, announced a three-year extension with the city's largest union, local 60 of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME). The deal reduces the city's labor costs by \$2.8 million through a reduction in promised pay raises and by forcing union members to pay 6 percent of health care premiums starting in January 2013 and another 6 percent at the beginning of 2014, and contribute half of the cost of their pension starting in

January 2012. By 2014, employee contributions for benefits would mirror those required in Walker's budget repair bill, according to the *Wisconsin State Journal*.

“We did it with collective bargaining,” Cieslewicz said. “The system worked exactly the way it was supposed to work.”

AFSCME members are expected to vote on the deal Thursday. If other city unions made similar deals, the city would save a net \$9.8 million next year, the mayor said.

According to the Associated Press, “‘Since Walker unveiled the bill on Feb. 11, between 50 and 100 of the state's 424 [school] districts have approved deals with unions, said Bob Butler,’ an attorney for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards. ‘The vast majority of them include benefit concessions consistent with what Walker proposed under the new collective bargaining law,’ Butler said.”

On Saturday Madison Teachers Inc., which represents 2,700 teachers and school employees in the capital, agreed to a two-year extension, which includes a wage freeze and benefit cuts in line with those proposed by Walker.

The *Wisconsin State Journal* noted, “For a Madison teacher earning the average salary of \$55,000, the pension contribution would cost about \$3,200 this year. Paying 5 percent of a health insurance premium would cost another \$260 for a single premium and \$700 for a family plan.”

After the wage freeze, the contract gives management the unilateral right to impose wage cuts and other concessions in 2012 without any union negotiation. In exchange for this agreement, the contract preserves

union dues payments. In a punitive measure, the contract penalizes teachers for the four days that schools were closed last month due to the protests, by docking their pay, forcing them to work 20 minutes extra per day with no extra pay, and allowing the victimization of teachers found to have invalid absentee excuses.

Superintendent Daniel Nerad declared, “If we feel we accomplished the things we needed to accomplish, there was no reason to do this work outside the context of collective bargaining.”

The response of the teachers unions is in line with the attitude taken by union executives throughout the struggle against Walker’s cuts. They opposed any job action, urging teachers engaged in a four-day sickout to return to work. Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) President Mary Bell repeatedly assured lawmakers that the union was willing to agree to all concessions—a promise that is now being turned into practice.

“On behalf of educators across our state, I remind you that weeks ago we accepted the financial concessions the governor asked for to help solve our state’s budget crisis. But we have consistently said that silencing the voices of workers by eliminating their collective bargaining rights goes too far,” said Bell in an article in Monday’s *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

This statement is a lie and distortion of the real situation. The unions have abandoned collective bargaining in any real sense of the term by accepting without question Walker’s economic demands. The only concern of Bell and the rest of the union executives is that they retain a “seat at the table” to impose these cuts and protect their own interests.

Bruce Keldahl, a retired state worker in Madison, said lower paid state and city workers he knows will not be able to pay their rent once these cuts go through. When asked about the role of the Democratic Party in carrying out pay cuts on workers, Bruce commented on a statement Obama made while campaigning in 2007.

“When he was campaigning, he said if there was ever an attack on workers he’d put on his shoes and be right there, marching with everyone—now he’s not. I haven’t

noticed a hell of a lot of change since he came into office.

“People are told to vote for the Democrats as the lesser of the two evils but in reality, we get screwed by both. These cuts to education are taking so much money away from average working people it’s going to make it difficult for their kids to get an education.”

The unions and Democratic Party officials are urging protesters to end demonstrations and take up a petition drive for the recall of eight Republican senators. They are also calling for voters to turn out at the ballot box on April 5, the day of an election for the state’s Supreme Court pitting conservative Justice David Posser against a Democratic Party-supported challenger. Christina Brey, a spokeswoman for the WEAC said that “educators are going to be watching this election, just to be sure the political power-grabbing that the governor has engaged in up to this point doesn’t go unchecked.”

In fact, the recall campaign is designed to prevent any coordinated struggle of the working class against the “power-grabbing,” which amounts to a major step toward corporate dictatorship in Wisconsin.



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