

Wisconsin workers discuss demand for general strike

Our reporting team
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A mood of militancy is growing among workers in Wisconsin as it has become clear that Republican Governor Scott Walker will not retreat from his plan to scuttle collective bargaining rights and push through more than \$1.5 billion in cuts in public education, health care and public employees' benefits.

Around 2,000 workers marched on the state capitol in Madison Thursday night, after more than two weeks of protests that have involved hundreds of thousands of workers and young people. Demonstrations also took place in Milwaukee Wednesday and Thursday, with University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee students protesting plans to slash \$250 million from the state university system and drive up tuition rates.

During an open mike session at Thursday night's demonstration on the capitol steps in Madison, Socialist Equality Party member Jerry White called for a general strike to force the resignation of Walker and his reactionary administration and was met with enthusiastic applause from workers and young people in the audience.

Walker is pressing ahead with his threat to wipe out 1,500 state jobs if the state legislature does not approve his "Budget Repair" bill by April 1, by sending out thousands of "at risk" notices today. Without the passage of the bill, the governor says, another 12,000 state and municipal jobs would be cut over the next two years.

The so-called budget repair bill imposes sharp increases in public workers' co-pays for health care and pensions and would bar them from negotiating over any issue except wages, with pay increases limited to the rate of inflation. Labor agreements could not exceed one year and union representation would have to be approved by a 51 percent vote every year.

In addition, bargaining rights would be eliminated altogether for childcare providers, home care workers, University of Wisconsin (UW) faculty and academic staff and UW Hospitals and Clinics employees.

The governor says local governments and schools districts need these "tools" to impose the cost-savings his budget demands, i.e., to allow them to rip up existing contracts and impose even deeper concessions on workers.

The governor—who weeks ago threatened to use the national guard to put down popular resistance—has barred protesters from the state capitol in Madison, and, as of this writing, scores of demonstrators who flooded into the building Thursday night face the threat of being forcibly removed or arrested after a court prohibited protesters from staying overnight as they have done for two weeks before Walker imposed restrictions Monday night.

Also on Thursday the Republican-controlled state senate ordered the forcible detention of 14 Democratic senators, who fled the state two weeks ago to postpone a vote on Walker's bill. For their part, the state Democrats, led by Senator Tim Cullen of Janesville, have already opened backchannel discussions with Republican Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald to return to the capitol in order to put the anti-worker bill to a vote and inevitable passage. This would be based on the bogus proposition that Republicans might agree to remove collective bargaining restrictions from the larger budget bill. "Some of the provisions in the budget-repair bill don't go into effect for months, so you could change them in the budget bill," Cullen told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

There is a growing anger among workers over the capitulation by the unions, whose leaders have said they will agree to all of Walker's economic demands if they are allowed to maintain their legal status. Walker—who is backed up by some of the most powerful corporate interests in the state and the nation—has no interest in negotiating and is seeking to decimate social services and workers' living standards, while eliminating taxes for the wealthy and selling off public assets.

"They want to return us to the day of company owned housing, make strikes illegal and establish a dictatorial government," one worker told the WSW.

strike might take just a day.”

On Thursday, supporters of the Socialist Equality Party distributed the statement “Walker must go! For a general strike in Wisconsin!” Workers discussed the issue with the WSW.

“Teachers have already set up a Facebook page talking about a strike,” said a worker whose wife is a teacher near Green Bay. “Destroying bargaining rights, selling off government property to the lowest bidder and the highest contributor—this is ridiculous. The Republicans are pushing harder and the Democrats will give in. Screw that, we can’t give in. My wife hasn’t had a raise in years. We can’t spend a dime. Our checkbook is on lockdown.”

Todd Endres, a Street Department worker in Madison for 36 years, said, “If Walker is so damned determined then we should be just as determined. He is closed to any negotiations—it’s his way or the highway. If a general strike is what it takes that’s what we should do. Drastic times require drastic measures. Our power is in numbers—you can’t fire everyone. There aren’t enough National Guardsmen to take over our jobs.

“So many people are getting shafted and have nothing to lose—but they can gain a lot of friends and solidarity by standing up together.

“I disagreed when I heard the union leaders were lying down and accepting the concessions. Who can give up anything else? I can’t remember the last time I got a raise that was actually equal to the cost of living.”

Commenting on the two-party system, he said, “You get squished faster by the Republicans and a little slower by the Democrats—but you still get squished.”

“A general strike is needed because it would take months to recall Walker—even if that worked,” Dave Walsh, an unemployed worker, said. “The unions have buckled, the Democrats cave in, but the conservatives never give up.”

Referring to Obama, he said, “The president has turned out to be Bush 2, I mean Bush 3. He bailed out the banks and no rules were set up to stop what they were doing. It is going to happen again.”

Larry Zehner, a retired carpenter whose wife is a retired teacher, said, “I am all for strikes. When I saw Walker’s budget I knew collective bargaining was only part of it. We know where the money is. A general strike is a good idea but can we get the numbers out here? If there were enough such a

Rob Meyer, a photographer from Minnesota, said, “The momentum has to continue and not just in Wisconsin, but across the US, and for that matter, the world. Egypt has given us some fire and it’s a domino effect. If the workers fall over, they will walk all over us like a steamroller. For a long time workers were beaten down, like a dog that’s been repeatedly whipped, but now is a good opportunity to bite back.”

Susan Nicol, a nurse at the UW Hospital, said, “This represents a step in the wrong direction. I want to live in a place where people care for each other, not a place where you step over people in the street. This budget is going to lead to the elimination of public schools and the privatization of everything. I’m worried our public schools are just going to turn into baby-sitting services.”

University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee students Megan Puebla and Amanda Patmore came to Madison to participate in the protests. They noted that under Democratic Governor Jim Doyle workers were forced to take a pay freeze and furloughs in return for healthcare benefits. Now workers were being forced to pay more for those benefits. The budget crisis was manufactured through giving tax breaks to corporations and the wealthy, and instead of cutting workers’ wages “we should be taxing the top 1 percent,” they said.



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