

Democrats, Republicans escalate attack on public employees

Patrick Martin
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Democratic and Republican politicians at the US state and local level are pressing ahead with a new round of attacks on the jobs and living standards of public employees and the public services they provide. They are working in tandem with the Obama administration and congressional Republicans, who are carrying out the same policies at the federal level.

In Massachusetts, where Democrats control the governorship and both houses of the state legislature, the House of Representatives voted April 27 to approve legislation that would strip municipal workers of the right to collective bargaining on health care benefits. The vote was an overwhelming 111-42, with the majority of Democrats and nearly all Republicans backing the bill. (See “Massachusetts: Democrats attack municipal workers’ health care”)

In response to this frontal assault on workers’ rights, Massachusetts AFL-CIO President Robert Haynes could only complain that he was “profoundly disappointed in every Democrat who voted to do away with collective bargaining here in Massachusetts.”

Admitting that what the Democrats were doing in Massachusetts “looks just like Wisconsin to me,” he made clear that the unions intend to do nothing to seriously fight the attack. He offered no explanation for the unions’ dishonest attempt to attribute the wave of anti-worker legislation around the country entirely to the Republicans, a lie that is being exposed in Massachusetts and other states controlled by the Democratic Party.

In another New England state, Connecticut, Democratic Governor Dan Malloy has reached a budget deal with the Democratic-controlled Senate that would impose \$2 billion in concessions on state workers, while giving the unions a role by determining which cuts the workers will be compelled to accept.

In nearby New Hampshire, the Republican-controlled state legislature passed legislation last week to prohibit mandatory union membership and dues collection for any employee, private or public. Democratic Governor John Lynch promised to veto the bill, but the Republicans have more than the 2-1 margin required to overturn a veto. The so-called “right-to-work” law, similar to those that have long restricted unions in the southern US states, is the first to pass in a state outside the South in 25 years.

The day after the Massachusetts vote, the lower house in the Midwestern state of Indiana voted to approve the most sweeping school voucher plan adopted by any state, a death blow to the principle of public education. The vouchers, paid for by state

funds, could be used by any family in the state at a private school. The bill passed 55-43, with most Democrats voting no, but only after they had agreed to abandon a protracted publicity stunt in which the Democrats blocked action on the bill by leaving the state and denying the Republican majority the necessary quorum.

The voucher program begins with some restrictions during the first two years, but by the third year any student could get a state-funded voucher to use towards tuition at private schools, with the money deducted directly from public education budgets. A separate bill passed the same day would expand charter schools and allow them to buy public school buildings at bargain basement prices—a bonanza for profit-based education corporations.

The Indiana legislature has already passed bills limiting collective bargaining rights for teacher unions and approving so-called “merit pay” for teachers, which ties salaries directly to student test scores.

The Midwestern states, once the center of industrial unionism in the United States, have become the focal point of the rampage against public-sector workers.

This began with the month-long confrontation in Wisconsin, touched off by Republican Governor Scott Walker, who pushed through a bill in March to slash the pay and benefits of state and local employees and eliminate most collective bargaining rights. The legislation has been temporarily blocked by a court injunction, but a Republican spokesman said April 29 that there had been discussion of reintroducing the bill in the legislature as early as May 3 as part of a new two-year state budget.

In Ohio, Republican Governor John Kasich signed a bill into law that represents an even more sweeping attack on public employees than the Wisconsin bill. The law outlaws strikes by 360,000 public employees, raises health care payments for workers, imposes performance-based pay on teachers and other local government workers, and makes it easier to decertify unions.

In Illinois, the Democratic-controlled Senate voted 59-0 for legislation that guts teacher tenure rights, effectively ends the right to strike for Chicago public school teachers, and expands the powers of local school boards to fire teachers arbitrarily, extend the school year, and make other changes.

In Michigan, Republican Governor Rick Snyder has pushed through legislation giving him the power to appoint emergency financial managers for cities facing fiscal crises. These unelected officials will have the power to tear up union contracts and unilaterally decide on pay, benefits and working conditions. In

some cases, prominent Democrats, like Detroit Mayor David Bing, are candidates to be handed these emergency powers.

Snyder also proposed, in a speech April 27, to eliminate teacher seniority as a factor in promotions or layoffs, to expand charter schools, and to demand greater “accountability” from local schools even while he slashes a half billion dollars from state aid to public education.

Nationwide, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures, some 744 bills have been introduced to attack public employee wages, benefits and collective bargaining rights. Such legislation is pending in nearly every state.

Both Democrats and Republicans are demanding that public employees and other sections of the working class pay the price for a projected \$125 billion in state budget deficits for the upcoming fiscal year.

A study released April 26 by the Pew Center on the States found that the current year deficits were dwarfed by the projected shortfall in pension and health care obligations for retired state workers. The report projects a \$660 billion shortfall in pension funding and a \$604 billion gap in retiree health care, for a total funding gap of \$1.26 trillion.

For years, public employee unions have forced workers to take concessions on pay in return for promises of higher pensions and medical coverage in retirement. Now the states will default on the deal.

In addition to the wages, benefits and jobs of public employees, the cuts proposed by state governors and legislatures include:

- New York—Democratic Governor Andrew Cuomo decided not to restore \$302 million in aid for New York City.
- Pennsylvania—Republican Governor Tom Corbett’s budget cuts higher education funding in half.
- Texas—The Republican House passed a budget cutting \$23 billion from current spending, including \$8 billion from local schools and \$4 billion from Medicaid.
- Oregon—Democratic Governor John Kitzhaber proposed cutting Medicaid reimbursement for doctors, dentists, hospitals and nursing homes by 19 percent.
- Florida—Republican Governor Rick Scott signed into law a bill attacking teacher tenure and imposing a “merit pay” plan based on test results.

These attacks have evoked outrage among working people, not only the public employees directly affected, but much broader layers of the working class who see these actions as aimed at lowering living standards and destroying basic democratic rights for all workers.

The unions have collaborated in these attacks, opposing any genuine mass struggle and urging workers to rely on the Democratic politicians, presenting them as the only alternative to the Republicans and the ultra-right. The truth is that both parties are doing the bidding of corporate America.

In every case, the unions are cynically seeking to defend their own institutional interests—including the automatic deduction of union dues from workers’ paychecks and the right of union officials to negotiate concessions and help impose them on the workers—by pledging to accept and enforce wage cuts, reductions

in benefits and attacks on working conditions. The turn by the US ruling elite to open class war has further exposed the unbridgeable chasm separating the official unions from the working class.

A new low in the bankruptcy of the unions’ policy of supporting the Democrats as the “lesser evil” came in Wisconsin this weekend. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka led a May 1 union demonstration in Milwaukee that featured hollow rhetoric about the evils of Governor Scott Walker and the Wisconsin Republicans.

Meanwhile, at the state Democratic Party’s annual Founders Day Dinner—attended by many of the same top union executives—the keynote speaker was Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick. He denounced a Republican policy of “cut spending, bust unions” only a few days after pushing his own anti-worker bill through his state legislature.

The real alternative to the bipartisan gang-up of the Democrats and Republicans is the building of an independent political movement of the working class that bases itself on the total rejection of all the cuts being demanded at the federal, state and local level. A mass movement must be organized to oppose the cuts and advance a socialist alternative that proceeds from the needs of working people, not the profits and personal fortunes of the corporations and the rich.

The claim that “there is no money” for jobs, schools, health care and decent wages is a lie. The resources of society are being plundered and monopolized by a criminal financial elite that exerts dictatorial control over the government, both political parties and the media.

The Socialist Equality Party calls on workers to assert their basic social rights, including good-paying jobs, education, housing, health care, utilities and access to culture, which must be guaranteed to all. We call for the building of committees of action in workplaces, communities and schools completely independent of the trade unions and their Democratic Party allies to mobilize the industrial and political strength of the working class.



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