

Court sanctions Wisconsin anti-worker law

Jerry White
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In a 4-3 ruling, the Wisconsin Supreme Court Tuesday struck down a lower court decision and cleared the way for the imposition of a new state law that will gut the living standards and workplace rights of 300,000 teachers, nurses and other public employees.

The law includes provisions to outlaw strikes and criminalize other forms of working class resistance that will be emulated by federal, state and local officials across the country as they impose the deepest cuts in social spending in US history.

When Republican Governor Scott Walker first signed the bill in March, the *Wall Street Journal* and other corporate mouthpieces praised it as a turning point in class relations, no less significant than Reagan's firing of the striking air traffic controllers in 1981 or British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's defeat of the coal miners in 1985.

The implementation of the law is a damning exposure of the state and national trade unions and their pseudo-left allies, who claimed the measure could be stopped by collaborating with the Democratic Party and appealing to the political establishment and the court system.

Walker's "budget repair bill" provoked the largest working class demonstrations in the US in nearly a quarter of a century. This movement, which erupted initially outside of the control of the unions, was fueled by popular discontent over falling living standards and the immense transfer of wealth to the American ruling elite following the Wall Street crash of 2008. Protesters in the state capital Madison were inspired by and openly identified with the revolutionary upheavals in Egypt and Tunisia.

From the very beginning, the unions, working in alliance with the Democratic Party, worked to smother the movement. Top executives in the public employee unions made it clear they supported Walker's economic demands, including a de facto pay cut of

\$4,000 a year through increased worker health care and pension contributions.

They sought to limit the struggle to what they called the defense of collective bargaining rights—by which they meant the right of union officials to negotiate wage cuts, layoffs and other concessions. Their talk of defending collective bargaining was a travesty under conditions in which they agreed in advance to all of the concessions demanded by the governor's office. Their concern was defending the narrow self-interest of the union apparatus—above all, the automatic deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks. To this end they offered up in return the wages, health benefits and pensions of the workers.

For their part, the Democrats in Wisconsin, as they have done throughout the country, insisted that workers had to pay for the state deficit. They castigated Walker for provoking a social explosion and boasted that they had previously imposed the deepest cuts in state history by working with the unions.

As far as the Democrats were concerned, Walker's moves against the unions threatened to undermine a critical source of campaign funds. They also threatened an important political asset for the American ruling elite. Without these tools of social control, they feared, working class opposition could develop into a political challenge to the capitalist system.

When thousands of workers and youth descended on the state capitol after the Wisconsin Republicans rushed through the bill on March 9, the unions blocked demands for a general strike of workers throughout the state. They rapidly shut down the protests and channeled social opposition behind petition drives to recall Republican legislators, appeals to the courts and, above all, a campaign for the election of Democrats, including Obama, in 2012.

While the bill was being challenged in the courts, the unions rushed to sign a series of contract extensions

that imposed Walker's wage and benefit cuts. These contracts also proscribed any challenge by teachers to the increases in class size and attacks on tenure that will inevitably accompany Walker's program to slash \$800 million from public education. In exchange, the deals allowed the continued deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks—something the new law prohibits, but not until existing agreements expire.

In response to Tuesday's state Supreme Court ruling, the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) and other unions filed a federal lawsuit. According to WEAC's parent union, the National Education Association, "The unions are not asking the court to block the new pension and health insurance contribution requirements imposed by the bill. The unions have long been on record that they accept these substantial economic cuts and seek only to preserve their basic rights to bargain and freely associate."

In other words, in exchange for imposing the dictates of the corporate and financial elite, the union executives want the sanction of the state to continue collecting tribute from the workers they are betraying. Such is the real role of these anti-labor organizations.

The implementation of the new law is also a damning indictment of the fraternity of ex-left groups, including the International Socialist Organization, which upheld the authority of the unions and the Democratic Party. Throughout the month-long struggle, the ISO presented the fight as a battle against "anti-union" Republicans and sought to conceal the role of the unions and the Democratic Party, which they invariably described as being on the side of the working class.

In a statement following the passage of Walker's bill, the ISO praised the political stunt carried out by the 14 Democrats senators who left the state to delay a vote on the bill, saying, "The 'Flight of the Fourteen' Democrats is a reminder—and a needed one after so many years with few if any examples—that Democratic politicians can be pressured to act by mass protest."

In opposition to this, the Socialist Equality Party called on workers to take the fight out of the hands of the trade unions by building new organizations of struggle, controlled by the rank-and-file and irreconcilably opposed to all of the concessions demands of both big business parties.

On March 3, the SEP issued a call for a general strike to force the resignation of Walker and his entire

government. We called on workers to reject all economic concessions and restrictions on the legal right of workers to negotiate and strike to defend and improve their living standards.

To cover the budget deficit and the cost of new and essential social spending, the SEP called for a substantial increase in taxes on corporate profits and the very rich, linking this demand to the struggle for a radical redistribution of wealth and the socialist transformation of the economy.

As the SEP explained, a fight against Walker and the Wisconsin bill could be carried out only through a break with the Democratic Party and the building of an independent, socialist party of the working class.

The importance of this fight for a new political strategy has come into clearer focus over the last three months, as the Obama administration has conspired with the Republican Party to destroy public education, Medicare and other basic social programs. Democratic administrations in Illinois, Massachusetts, New York and other states are working hand in glove with the unions to attack teachers and other public employees.

The mass struggles of the working class in the first six months of this year, from Egypt and Tunisia, to Greece and the US, are an initial expression of the enormous popular opposition to the efforts of the financial elite to make the working class pay for the breakdown of the capitalist system.

In the US, the battle of Wisconsin was only the first of what will be many social struggles that will pit the working class against the entire social, economic and political order. To prepare for the next stage of struggle critical political lessons must be drawn, above all the need to build the Socialist Equality Party as the new revolutionary leadership of the working class.

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