

Wisconsin unions hold rally against “right-to-work” legislation

Niles Williamson
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On Saturday, an estimated 3,000 people attended a union-organized rally in Madison, Wisconsin, to protest so called “right-to-work” legislation that is moving quickly through the state legislature.

The right-wing bill, which would outlaw mandatory dues payment to a union as a condition of employment in private companies, was introduced and passed in the Senate last week. It will be introduced to the Republican-dominated Assembly today, and it is expected to be brought to a vote and approved on Thursday.

Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, a likely candidate for president in 2016, has pledged to sign the bill into law soon after it is approved.

The sections of the political establishment that support the measure—primarily the Republicans—are seeking to dispense with the unions as they escalate the war against the working class. In addition to the right-to-work law, Walker is also seeking to push through a raft of cuts to social programs, as was also the case in 2011, when legislation was passed severely limiting collective bargaining rights for most public sector workers.

The state’s Democrats, on the other hand, see the unions as both a significant source of cash for political campaigns and as instruments for containing social conflict and enforcing attacks on workers.

The character of the protests against the right-to-work legislation is entirely conditioned on these political considerations. While the unions would prefer the bill not pass, they are also completely opposed to any mobilization against it by the workers they claim to represent. The demonstration was mostly composed of bureaucrats, union members and supporters bussed in by union locals from across the state.

The principal speakers on Saturday, including

Wisconsin AFL-CIO president Phil Neuenfeldt, focused their remarks on urging workers to testify against the bill at a limited public hearing today and “bear witness” to its passage on Thursday.

The Democrats and the unions have also not expressed any fundamental opposition to the hundreds of millions of dollars in proposed cuts to public education and social programs contained in Walker’s latest biennial budget proposal. There has been no attempt to mobilize workers against these cuts, in Wisconsin or anywhere else.

Saturday’s protests and others earlier in the week were markedly smaller than protests in Wisconsin in 2011. In February and March of that year, tens of thousands of workers and students participated in demonstrations, which included the occupation of the capitol building in Madison, to oppose a law that curtailed collective bargaining for most public sector workers and massive budget cuts aimed at public education.

The protests were corralled by the Democratic Party and the unions, who funneled workers’ anger into a futile recall election campaign aimed at Republican politicians, including Walker.

Wisconsin Democrats boasted during the 2011 protests of imposing the deepest austerity measures in the state’s history by working with the unions. After the passage of Act 10, the public unions moved quickly to impose concession contracts on teachers and other state workers, before the bill came into effect, in a bid to maintain their bargaining privileges.

Among workers, there is little active support for the unions, which have collaborated for decades in the destruction of workers’ living standards. As is the case nationally, the unions have lost a significant membership base in Wisconsin over the last three

decades. The union membership rate stood at 11.7 percent in 2014, down from its historic peak of 20.9 percent in 1989. Since the passage of the legislation curtailing public sector unions in 2011, the number of workers in the state belonging to a union has fallen by more than 30,000.

The union leaders oppose right-to-work legislation out of the knowledge that if dues payment is made voluntary, many workers will stop paying them, severely curtailing one of their main sources of income.

The dues collected from rank-and-file union members are used to fill the pockets of a bevy of well-paid bureaucrats. Among them are Wisconsin state AFL-CIO president Neuenfeldt, who collected a salary of more than \$108,526 in 2010. Nationally, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka pulled in a total compensation of \$368,652 in 2013, while executive vice president Arlene Holt-Baker raked in a total of \$635,507.

In addition to furnishing such handsome salaries to their executives, the unions also funnel tens of millions in dues payments to fill the campaign coffers of the Democratic Party. The AFL-CIO contributed approximately \$100 million to state and federal election campaigns in 2013, with 95 percent of this sum going to the Democratic Party.

This money goes to maintaining a political party which, under the leadership of President Barack Obama, has presided over the greatest transfer of wealth, from the working class to the corporate and financial aristocracy, in US history.

The author recommends:

The Lessons of Wisconsin
[10 August 2012]



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