

AFSCME backs Illinois bill banning strikes

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On June 4, the Illinois General Assembly passed Senate Bill 1229, which would amend the Illinois Public Labor Relations Act to outlaw strikes by or lockouts of state employees, while allowing either the state or public employee unions to call for binding arbitration.

The law was backed heavily by AFSCME, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, and is a prime example of the utter bankruptcy of the unions, who agree in principle that workers will have to accept cuts in wages and living conditions and are wary that a strike by workers determined to fight Rauner's cuts could quickly get out of their control.

The bill applies to noneducational state employees and mandates mediation to start within 30 days of the expiration date of a collective bargaining agreement or within 30 days of the law's effective date for contracts that expire between June 30, 2015 and June 30, 2019, that is, through Rauner's term of office. Once mediation starts, neither strikes nor lockouts are permitted, and 30 days after the start of mediation, either party can claim that an impasse has been reached and demand binding arbitration. During the mediation, contract terms will remain in force, including those pertaining to dues collection.

Rauner, a Republican with a reported net worth somewhere around \$500 million and a close friend of Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, was brought into state government in order to wring far-reaching concessions out of workers, while allowing the Democratic Party to pose as "left" critics of his administration. His agenda, shaped by that of Republican Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin, has included proposals that threaten the unions' dues base through the creation of "right-to-work zones" and the elimination of "fair-share" dues collection.

Rauner is currently in negotiations with AFSCME over a contract covering 38,000 state workers that is set to expire June 30. According to an AFSCME bulletin and other reports, Rauner is demanding devastating

concessions from state workers, and is preparing a government shutdown—a lockout—in order to force through his proposal.

As a candidate, Rauner declared, "we may have to go through a little rough times and we have to do what Ronald Reagan did with the air traffic controllers." Recently, Rauner sent "Contingency Preparation Assessment" questionnaires to state agencies, asking how many temporary workers they might need to hire and what effects closing would have on the provision of public services—an indication of his plan to do something similar if the unions do not agree to his demands.

First among Rauner's demands is a wage freeze for the length of the contract as well as a massive increase in worker health care costs, reportedly as high as 500 percent. Taking inflation into account, the wage freeze would represent an effective pay cut. Other measures being demanded include an increase in the workweek from 37.5 to 40 hours, and a reduction in the number of paid holidays and vacations.

Rauner is also demanding that traditional contract provisions be eliminated, such as step increases and a variety of seniority rights, in favor of "performance-based" raises and retention in the case of layoffs. Significantly, the state is also seeking the right to lay off workers and replace them with contractors, privatizing the services they currently provide. Another measure would push workers into "voluntarily" moving into reduced Tier 2 pensions, drastically reducing constitutionally protected annual increases.

The unions backed Senate Bill 1229, with AFSCME spokesman Anders Lindall characterized Bill 1229 as an "important tool that could encourage both sides to come to an agreement," and that even if negotiations reach an impasse, "it would enable us to submit those to an independent arbitrator." That is, the unions are pushing the claim that if Rauner is forced into binding arbitration, workers will get a better deal than they would get through a Rauner-imposed lockout.

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The reality is that AFSCME, which has never gone on strike in Illinois in 40 years—the span in which it has represented state workers—certainly has no interest in starting now. In fact, they are frightened that a mass action by state workers would go well beyond the bounds they are willing to accept. As a result, they pushed for Democrats in the state Legislature to pass SB 1229, relieving the unions of the responsibility of even pretending to consider a strike, receiving in exchange a protection of their income stream from the predations of Rauner, who has no particular interest in working with the unions to achieve the austerity measures he seeks.

In fact, AFSCME has even gone so far as to characterize a Rauner shutdown/lockout as a strike. AFSCME deputy director Mike Newman characterized AFSCME's support for SB 1229 as adding back an element of "risk" for Rauner, asking in relation to the collecting bargaining process: "What is the motive when one side is looking forward to a strike?" In other words, Newman pushes the conception that arbitration would be a real blow to Rauner's agenda, preserving much more than a work stoppage could.

The truth is that Rauner has taken the measure of AFSCME and is completely confident in the complicity of the unions in keeping any strike or lockout within narrow parameters, and expects to deal a massive blow to the unions' infrastructure, including their support for the Democrats.

For their part, the Democrats in the legislature are fully aware that AFSCME is hanging workers out to dry. An arbitration process will tend to result in a compromise between the position of AFSCME and that of the Rauner administration. When both sides in principle accept that workers will need to sustain cuts, and with Rauner's cuts being as deep as they are, the end result will be substantial hits to public workers' livelihoods.



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