

Wisconsin governor Walker implements draconian state budget

George Gallanis
16 July 2015

On Sunday, the Republican governor of Wisconsin, Scott Walker, signed into law the 2015-2017 state budget one day before he officially announced his 2016 presidential campaign.

The roughly \$73 billion state budget is a continuation of the assault on the Wisconsin working class and includes deep cuts to public education, drug testing for public assistance, and the elimination of laws that protected wages on public construction projects and limited the length of the work week.

Most significantly, the budget guts \$250 million from the University of Wisconsin (UW) higher education system over the next two years. Campuses throughout the state will be faced with layoffs, and faculty will be expected to “voluntarily” go into early retirement.

For UW-Madison, the state’s preeminent public research institution, the budget cuts will result in a total of 400 layoffs and unfilled positions. At UW-Milwaukee, confronting the largest budget cut in the school’s history, hundreds of staff and faculty will be asked to take an early retirement buyout equal to a one-time payment of 50 percent of their annual salary. Across the UW system, nearly 1,000 employees will be encouraged to take an early retirement.

This is not the first time in recent years that the UW system’s budget has been slashed. Walker’s predecessor, Democratic governor Jim Doyle, previously cut \$250 million from the UW school system between 2003 and 2005 and \$284 million in 2009-2011 from the public school system.

The budget also contains a reduction in funding for most public school districts over the previous year and a further expansion of the state voucher program, siphoning more public funds to private charter and religious schools

According to *Wisconsinstatebudget.org*, Wisconsin

has cut state funding to public schools by 15 percent per student between 2008 and 2015. Moreover, the expanding voucher program is expected to drain \$48 million dollars from public education for kindergarten through high school and transfer roughly the same amount to private schools over the next two years. The transfer of funds from public to private schools is expected to be equal to \$600 to \$800 million over the next decade.

Other key changes include the implementation of drug screenings for unemployment insurance and public assistance recipients; those found using a controlled substance will be required to undergo some form of drug rehabilitation. The original proposal, already vague in its term, required “only reasonable suspicion of use of a controlled substance without a valid prescription may be subject to testing.”

However, Walker vetoed this provision, stating: “I am vetoing the requirement that testing is based on reasonable suspicion because I object to limiting the department’s ability to determine which program participants will be screened and, if indicated, tested for illegal use of a controlled substance.” Therefore, there is absolutely no standard set for how one is to be screened for the use of a controlled substance, making it likely that screenings will be arbitrary and punitive.

The budget also contains the removal of a “prevailing wage law” requirement for local government projects. Placed into law during the Great Depression, the law formulates wages and/or benefits for workers of publicly funded construction projects. It assesses the local market for wages of similar projects. The aim of the law is to assure projects will be completed by contractors with the best skill and efficiency, and not by those offering the lowest wage rates.

The current budget repeals this law for local

government municipalities and opens the door for the slashing of wages for workers of these projects. Kevin Duncan, a professor of economics at Colorado State University, wrote in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* that “the state could expect to lose a net total of 8,700 jobs across all sectors of the economy, \$1.2 billion in overall economic output and \$77 million in tax revenue that would likely necessitate cuts in other vital public services.”

The budget eliminates a state mandate known as “One Day Rest in Seven” that guaranteed factory and retail workers at least one day off per week. The implementation of the law in 1919, just two years after the working class took power in Russia, was bound up with growing combativeness of the working class at the time.

Walker’s change to this law now provides employers the ability to work their employees seven days a week, if they “voluntarily” choose so. However, this provides no protection for workers and grants employers the leverage to coerce or entice workers into working every day of the week.

The budget is an expression of the ruling elite’s ruthless efforts to gnaw back concessions won over decades of struggle by the working class. Deep cuts to public education, public benefits and changes to labor laws have been carried out by Democrats and Republicans alike.



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