

Obama urges Illinois legislature to adopt bipartisan plan for austerity

Alexander Fangmann
15 February 2016

As state-funded social service agencies continue to close and some state universities and colleges warn that they might be forced to shut down before the end of the semester, US President Barack Obama visited the state capitol in Springfield on February 10 to urge Illinois legislators to adopt a bipartisan austerity plan.

Concerned about the potential of social opposition if the impasse continues much longer, Obama suggested that state Democrats moderate their resistance to Republican Governor Bruce Rauner's plans, noting his willingness to collaborate with Republicans, saying that Democrats and Republicans share many of the "same values, even though they may disagree with me on the means to achieve them. I think sometimes my Republican colleagues make constructive points about outdated regulations that may need to be changed, or programs that even though well-intended, didn't always work the way they were supposed to."

The billionaire governor has been locked in a struggle with Democratic leaders in the state, House Speaker Michael Madigan, Senate President John Cullerton, and Chicago Mayor Rahm Emanuel, largely over the question of whether the trade unions will continue to play a significant role in state government and in carrying out the austerity policies of the ruling class. While the Democrats generally favor using the services of the unions to contain social opposition, Rauner believes the continued existence of the unions has slowed the implementation of austerity to an unacceptable degree.

Basing himself on the success of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker in implementing "right-to-work" legislation, Rauner has essentially held the state budget hostage, threatening to veto any bill sent to him unless the Democrats approve his "Turnaround Agenda." This agenda is an assortment of anti-working class measures,

which includes cuts to workers' compensation, unemployment insurance, restrictions on lawsuits against corporations, a freeze on local government property taxes, limitations on what issues are subject to collective bargaining and prevailing wage requirements, and local "right-to-work" zones. It also included proposals aimed at the Democratic Party, redistricting reform and term limits, which would almost certainly affect them disproportionately.

Notably, the issue of redistricting was something Obama explicitly cited in his speech as something he supported, saying "nobody has got clean hands on this thing."

While obviously not in favor of the measures affecting their hold on office, the state Democrats do not in principle oppose most of the measures in Rauner's agenda. They have restricted the topics of collective bargaining before, such as in Senate Bill 7, which limited bargaining issues and the ability of public school teachers to strike. They have also cut unemployment insurance and limited lawsuits in the past, such as in 2005, when they limited medical malpractice lawsuits in a bill that was later overturned by the courts.

The Democratic Party has also made attacks on pensions and retirements a central plank of its program, to the point that former Democratic Governor Pat Quinn said he was "put on earth" to cut pensions. This stand on pensions played no small role in Rauner's election as governor, with working class disgust severely limiting turnout on behalf of Quinn, who the party nonetheless put up for reelection. This was at least partly motivated by the idea that the Democrats needed a Republican governor as a foil to make them appear oppositional.

After decades of collaborating with both big business

parties in undermining the jobs and living standards of state and city workers, the unions have also sought to patch up their credibility by posing as opponents of the Republican governor.

This has been most acute in regards to the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which has been without a contract since June 30. Rauner, who insists on referring to the union as “Afscammy,” has proposed doubling state workers’ health care contributions while freezing wages. He has also proposed opening up state government services to privatization, and wants to eliminate step increases, while introducing “merit pay” measures.

On January 15, Rauner declared an impasse in negotiations, asking the Illinois Labor Relations Board, whose majority is appointed by the ruling governor’s party, to impose his contract on state workers.

The main problem that the Democrats have with Rauner’s plans is that they threaten to hobble the trade unions, the most important component of the Democratic Party’s political organization in the state and a major source of campaign funds. The trade unions are an integral component of class rule, and the Democrats are keenly aware of how important the trade unions have been in imposing austerity and attacks on the working class since the beginning of the financial crisis. This can be seen quite clearly in the role played by the Chicago Teachers Union in carrying out attacks on public education in coordination with Emanuel.

Media commentators have repeated the line that Obama tried to use the opportunity of the speech to paint himself in historic language as something of a “Great Compromiser,” saying that “Rather than accept the notion that compromise is a sellout to one side, we’ve got to insist on the opposite—that it can be a genuine victory that means progress for all sides.” However, this comment, and the speech as a whole, should be read as Obama’s warning to the ruling class that while austerity is the only permissible policy, it has to be carried out in such a way as to prevent working class anger from boiling over into open revolt.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact