

Sanders' primary victory and the social crisis in Wisconsin

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The victory of Democratic Senator Bernie Sanders, a self-described “democratic socialist,” in Tuesday’s primary election in Wisconsin is yet another expression of the deep discontent and hostility of the working class to endless austerity and social inequality. Sanders has tapped into the initial radicalization of millions of workers and young people by presenting himself as an opponent of the “billionaire class” and calling for free college education.

The working class in Wisconsin, one of the so-called Rust Belt states in the Midwest, has been devastated over the last forty years by deindustrialization, a process that was dramatically exacerbated in the wake of the 2008 economic crisis. The number of Wisconsin residents living in poverty has risen to its highest level in at least three decades. According to a recent report by the Center on Wisconsin Strategy, 27 percent of workers do not make enough in hourly wages to keep a family of four out of poverty.

As part of the auto bankruptcy overseen by President Barack Obama, GM shuttered its Janesville plant, bringing an end to auto production in the state, concluding a process that began in 1988 with the closure of Chrysler’s facilities in Kenosha. In this period tens of thousands of workers also lost decent-paying jobs following closures and consolidations in manufacturing, brewing, and the paper and wood products industry.

Over the last 35 years wages have barely increased for the vast majority while the top one percent has increased its share of income to record levels. The top one percent in the state saw their real income increase by 149 percent between 1979 and 2012, capturing 91 percent of all income growth during this period. Wisconsin’s median hourly wage in 2014 was \$17.38, which, accounting for inflation, was only 71 cents more

than it was in 1971.

In Racine, the *World Socialist Web Site* spoke with Tyler, a construction worker, and Vanessa, a stay at home mother. Both had just voted for Sanders. “I don’t like Donald Trump,” Vanessa said, “He is very, very disrespectful and racist. As for Hillary, I just don’t trust her and feel like her track record is very bad. I like that Bernie has supported the civil rights movement for a long time and he wants to help the middle class and take on the big corporations.”

Tyler added, “Sanders wants to bring down the billionaires. It’s time for the one percenters to pay. I only make \$50,000 a year and I only get a \$1,300 tax return when these billionaires ship their money to the Cayman Islands so they don’t have to pay taxes.”

The eruption of mass protests in February and March five years ago against budget cutting and anti-working class legislation by the state Republican Party and Wisconsin governor Scott Walker was fueled by immense social tensions, which had been building over the decades. Hundreds of thousands of teachers, firefighters, industrial workers, and high school and college students participated in what was the largest eruption of working-class struggle in the United States since the 1980s.

This movement emerged largely outside of the control of the trade unions, which had long collaborated in the attacks on the working class by the corporations and both big-business parties. Students and workers occupied the state capitol building in Madison for two weeks while tens of thousands from across the state and the country turned out for mass protests inside and outside the building. Protests were held in cities throughout the state with teachers engaging in sickout protests and high school students walking out of their classes.

Concerned only with their own incomes and salaries, which were threatened by Walker's threat to eliminate the automatic dues check-off, the public sector unions made it clear that they were not opposed to austerity, as long as they were included in the process. Democratic legislators boasted that they had carried out the deepest cuts in the state's history under previous governor Jim Doyle without provoking a social explosion because they worked with the unions.

Fearing that anti-austerity protests would spread throughout the country, especially in states like California and New York where Democratic administrations were carrying out similar budget cuts, the Democrats and the trade unions worked to strangle the protests by funneling opposition behind a feckless recall campaign against Republican state legislators and Governor Walker.

Walker easily won the recall election in 2012 when the Democrats ran Milwaukee mayor Tom Barrett, who ran a right-wing campaign pitched to big business. Three years later in 2015 Walker signed into law "right-to-work" legislation. Without state sanction, the unions, which were further discredited by the betrayal of the 2011 struggle, saw a collapse in membership. The percentage of workers in Wisconsin that belong to unions has fallen from 14.2 percent in 2010 to just 8.3 percent in 2015.

Far from going away, the social anger that erupted in 2011 has only intensified. Sanders has been the initial beneficiary of this anti-capitalist sentiment and popular hostility to both corporate-controlled political parties.



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