

# Illinois officials prepare all-out assault on state workers

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12 August 2016

Illinois Republican Governor Bruce Rauner has proposed a contract for 37,000 state workers represented by American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 31 that deepens the assault on state workers. Both Republicans and Democrats, including Rauner's close friend, Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel, are backing this attack.

The current labor agreement expired on June 30, 2015, and since January Rauner and his management team have refused to negotiate with the union. Instead they have requested that the Illinois Labor Relations Board (ILRB) declare an impasse, which would allow the governor to impose their last offer and for state workers to reject it and strike. Rauner has threatened to replace striking workers if they walk out.

Among the most notable of the provisions in Rauner's last contract proposal is a four-year wage freeze for all workers. That freeze would also prevent any "lane" changes (promotions) workers would normally be entitled to after working a set number of years and receiving positive evaluations. In addition, since another provision increases the workday from 37.5 to 40 hours per week, the freeze is in reality a pay cut, and given current rates of inflation, workers will see a substantial reduction in their living standards.

The contract also includes substantial cuts to health insurance benefits. Among the provisions are a doubling of premiums paid by workers for health and dental insurance. Alternately workers will also be offered the option of keeping their current premiums in exchange for reduced coverage. Regardless of which option is chosen, the result will be large increases in the cost of health care and an effective reduction in income.

The state is also considering retroactively increasing health insurance premiums back to the start of the contract, with the University of Illinois warning its

workers that the state was contemplating such a move. Katie Ross, senior director of human resources at the university, said, "We have not ever seen a suggestion of retroactive premium increases being collected from our pay before. This could create financial hardships." Already, the state has been late in paying group health insurance claims due to the budget impasse, and some health providers have been demanding payment up front from workers or have sent unpaid bills to collection agencies due to the state's failure to pay.

New employees who retire will be responsible for 100 percent of their health care costs during retirement, rather than having those costs paid for, as is the current practice. Under already approved law, such workers would also have Tier II pensions, which pay out much less in benefits, assuring that most retired workers will essentially be living in poverty.

Another major proposal is the introduction of a merit pay system. Under this program, the state would create an annual bonus fund, which would pay out only for those workers or units deemed to be "high performers." Such a system is rife with the possibilities for abuse by both managers and by union officials who would work jointly to come up with the standards used to determine bonuses.

Workers' job security will also take a major hit due to new rules surrounding the use of contractors and vendors. The state now reserves the right to contract out "any work it deems necessary," rather than even the weak requirements that were previously in place. Now, whenever the state proposes to use contractors that would lead to layoffs, managers and union officials will form a "labor-management team," which will put together a proposal to compete against the contractors. Called "managed competition," this provision puts AFSCME directly in the position of negotiating

concessions at individual agencies and workplaces.

Further, contractors and vendors no longer have to be dismissed before regular state workers during any layoffs. “Bumping” rights are also drastically reduced in regard to the type of position laid off workers may qualify for, and are much more limited in scope than previously. These measures prepare the groundwork for the wholesale privatization of state government.

Workers will now also be subject to annual evaluations, no doubt with the aim of getting rid of workers with higher pay or more militant workers. They would also be subject to “reasonable suspicion” drug and alcohol testing, with the possibility of being immediately fired.

On July 7, ILRB rejected Rauner’s request for an expedited ruling, which would sidestep the usual procedure of waiting for a decision by an administrative law judge on unfair labor practices charges filed by both the governor and AFSCME. An AFSCME press release said, “Testimony before the [ILRB] indicated that a final ruling in the case will likely come in November.”

Rauner campaigned for office on a promise to attack state workers and bring pay and benefits down to the level of neighboring Indiana and Missouri. During a campaign speech he said, “I apologize but we may have to go through a little rough times and we have to do what Ronald Reagan did with the air traffic controllers,” referring to Reagan’s firing of 11,000 striking air traffic controllers and the destruction of their union, PATCO, in 1981.

Jason Barclay, Rauner’s general counsel recently warned, “An AFSCME strike could result in serious disruptions to its members’ lives—disruption of pension calculations because of a lengthy strike, loss of wages and health insurance during a lengthy strike and the possibility of being replaced by replacement workers, potentially permanently.”

In response to these threats, AFSCME has made it clear it would do nothing to defend workers and is ready to capitulate to Rauner’s draconian demands. Anders Lindall, a spokesman for AFSCME, has said repeatedly, “AFSCME members don’t want to strike. We’ve never had a strike of state employees.”

Facing substantial opposition from rank-and-file workers, AFSCME appealed to the state to work with the union to oppose these cuts in order to prevent an

explosion like the one that erupted against Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker in 2011. “Not confrontation, but compromise,” Lindall said, “That’s what AFSCME wants, clearly that’s what the people of Illinois want. Bruce Rauner trying to force confrontation is out on an island with the support of a small minority of Illinoisans.”

AFSCME officials have said they are preparing for a possible strike at the beginning of September. Left in the hands of AFSCME any such action would be aimed at allowing militant workers to blow off some steam while the union tries to push through a sellout before the ILRB ruling in November.

In order to fight these attacks, which are sanctioned by both the Democrats and Republicans, workers must take the conduct of the struggle out of the hands of AFSCME and the AFL-CIO by forming rank-and-file committees. State workers must appeal for the broadest mobilization of the working class to oppose the bipartisan austerity plan and defend the social rights of all public and private sector workers.



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