

Illinois governor threatens to dispatch National Guard if state workers strike

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Republican Illinois governor Bruce Rauner, a multimillionaire, threatened last week to replace Illinois state workers with the National Guard if they go on strike. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 31, which covers 38,000 state workers, began a strike authorization vote on January 30.

The current labor contract between AFSCME and the state of Illinois expired on June 30, 2015. Rauner first stated in 2015 that he was “pursuing all options,” which included the use of the National Guard and retired workers as strikebreakers. The Rauner administration recently reiterated this threat, with Dennis Murashko, the governor’s general counsel, telling Illinois news media outlets, “We will look at every service option available to us,” confirming that the use of the Illinois National Guard as strikebreakers is “one of the options.”

Rauner has no doubt been emboldened by the coming to power of President Donald Trump and the anti-working-class government he has assembled. Trump’s vice president, Mike Pence, has been in talks with Wisconsin’s Republican governor Scott Walker about imposing sweeping attacks on federal employees like Walker did to state workers in 2011.

During his campaign for governor in 2014, Rauner said, “We may have to do what Ronald Reagan did with the air traffic controllers ... sort of a do-over and shut things down for a while.” The ominous threat was a reference to Reagan’s 1981 firing of 11,345 striking air traffic controllers, the jailing of union leaders and smashing of the Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization (PATCO). Reagan banned the fired controllers from working in a federal agency for life, ending the careers of thousands of workers.

In November 2016, the Illinois Labor Relations

Board (ILRB) declared that negotiations between the state and the union had reached an impasse after Rauner requested that ILRB intervene, allowing the governor to begin unilaterally implementing his draconian contract, which included a four-year wage freeze and a doubling of health insurance premiums. Last December, however, an Illinois circuit court judge agreed to a request by AFSCME to place a temporary stay on the implementation of Rauner’s contract.

In response, AFSCME proposed a new contract, with much of it aligning with Rauner’s proposed cuts, including a four-year wage freeze and an increase in the out-of-pocket costs for health insurance. Rauner rejected the offer, refusing to negotiate further, leading AFSCME to initiate the strike authorization vote, which will reportedly be complete in mid-February.

Roughly 30,000 state workers in AFSCME are strike eligible. Restricted from striking are public safety employees who work in adult and juvenile correctional facilities. It is uncertain if the judicial stay on the impasse declared by ILRB will be lifted or made permanent. There is a possibility it may take months before a conclusion is reached.

The Republican governor has already taken the measure of his supposed opposition. AFSCME has never called a strike and the unions are far more frightened of unleashing the anger of workers than working out a dirty deal with Rauner. As the AFSCME web site noted: “Making clear that this framework did not represent the union’s ‘last, best and final offer’ on these issues, [Roberta] Lynch [executive director for AFSCME Council 31] stressed that the union stands ready to negotiate further on all other outstanding issues.”

In fact, AFSCME officials, who are aligned with the state Democratic Party, no doubt welcome the

strikebreaking threats to help wear down the resistance of rank-and-file to concessions. The ILRB has joined in these threats.

In an email to AFSCME state workers, John Terranova, the Deputy Director of Labor Relations for the State of Illinois, threateningly wrote, “The State will vigorously pursue all lawful means at its disposal for challenging an unlawful strike. Even if a strike by AFSCME is determined to be legal, employees may be replaced. Unless an unfair labor practice caused the strike, striking employees may not automatically have the right to have their job back at the end of the strike. They would only have the right to vacancies IF they were qualified and IF one exists.”

Terranova repeated this threat in another recent email, writing, “Replacement workers can be hired to maintain services during a strike, and in some cases, those replacement workers may be permanent.”

Commenting on capitolfax.com, one worker wrote, “I think all of these emails are borderline harassing. It’s important to note that in every one of these emails they put the not-so-veiled threat out there that if you strike you may be replaced. Either they want the union to strike and are hoping these harassing emails will make people vote to strike or they are completely incompetent and don’t understand how these emails aren’t helpful.”

It is possible, if not likely, that Rauner has sought to provoke a strike from the beginning. He is counting on the state unions to react no differently than the AFL-CIO did when Reagan fired the PATCO strikers: leaving the embattled workers isolated in the face of state repression until they were worn down and defeated.

The forces arrayed against workers are threatening. However, they have far more potential allies. Millions of workers in Illinois and around the country—from autoworkers, Caterpillar workers, railroad workers and truckers to teachers, firefighters, high school and college students and all those who rely on public services—are being thrown into struggle against the Trump administration and the austerity measures imposed by Democrats and Republicans alike.

State workers must take the conduct of this struggle into their own hands by electing rank-and-file committees, independent of AFSCME, the AFL-CIO, and other unions. These committees should call on

every section of the working class to defend state workers against Rauner’s attacks. Above all, the fight to defend the social rights of the working class—for secure and good-paying jobs, health care, a comfortable retirement and essential social services—requires an independent political struggle by the working class against the capitalist system, and the looting of society’s resources by the corporate and financial aristocracy.



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