

Illinois state workers vote overwhelmingly to strike

Alexander Fangmann
3 March 2017

Talks between AFSCME Council 31 and the administration of Republican billionaire governor Bruce Rauner continue to drag on fruitlessly despite a strike authorization vote by state workers.

On February 23, AFSCME announced that its members had voted overwhelmingly to authorize a strike in response to brutal concession demands by the Rauner administration. Rather than prepare a fight against Rauner and his retrograde policies, AFSCME, which has repeatedly declared it is doing everything in its power to avoid a strike, is preparing to impose a historic defeat.

This was the first strike vote by state workers in the 40 years since state workers have been allowed to unionize and bargain collectively. Out of 28,000 eligible voters, 80 percent voted. Of those voting, 81 percent voted in favor of strike, around 18,000 workers. Roughly 10,000 employees of the Department of Corrections and Department of Juvenile Justice were ineligible to vote.

In contrast to AFSCME leaders, who view the vote as a maneuver to allow workers to vent their anger, the vote expressed a desire to fight on the part of the majority of workers.

Illinois state workers have been working without a contract since their last one expired at the end of June 2015. This coincides with the beginning of the state's now-historic budget impasse. The impasse, while expressing differences in tactics between the Democrats and Republicans over how best to carry out austerity, has been used as a bludgeon against workers to scare them into accepting the rotten terms being offered by Rauner.

AFSCME's initial strategy was to work closely with the Democrats who control the state legislature to pass a bill that would have forced stalled negotiations into

arbitration. Rauner's veto of the bill was upheld despite Democratic super-majorities in both chambers, as some Democrats declined to support the override.

In January 2016, Rauner declared that talks were at an impasse over his draconian contract terms, which included a four-year wage freeze with an introduction of "merit" pay, a dramatic increase in health insurance costs for workers—reportedly double in many cases—and the ability to increase privatization of state services and limit layoff rights.

Rauner then began the process of having the Illinois Labor Relations Board (ILRB), whose board members are appointed by the governor, agree that negotiations were at an impasse, which would allow him to begin imposing his contract terms on state workers without their assent. The ILRB issued its final ruling on the matter in November 2016, at which point the Rauner administration began imposing its contract terms.

Implementation was temporarily halted by a December legal challenge by AFSCME, which prevailed in court on a technicality—that the ILRB ruling had not been issued in written form as required.

Later that month, Lisa Madigan, the Democratic Illinois attorney general, who is the daughter of Michael Madigan, the Democratic House speaker, filed a lawsuit to halt pay to state workers, saying that the state lacked constitutional authority to issue paychecks due to its lack of a budget. This reactionary move, aimed to force workers to come to an agreement with Rauner, has been temporarily halted by an injunction issued by a St. Clair county court.

Throughout the entire process, AFSCME has pleaded with the governor to return to negotiations, saying that it is willing to continue to provide concessions. In January, AFSCME leaders announced they were willing to accept the four-year wage freeze and some

increases in their health care costs, as part of a new framework for talks.

AFSCME, however, indicated that these concessions were not its bottom line and that indeed it was prepared to go much further. Roberta Lynch, executive director of AFSCME Council 31, stated that these concessions were not the union's "last, best and final offer" and the union declared it stood "ready to negotiate further on all other outstanding issues."

It is likely that one of the main points of contention in the talks is the proposed elimination of any remaining limits on privatization, as well as management's ability to replace open positions with temporary and contract workers. While AFSCME has shown itself more than willing to give up workers' pay and health care benefits, these changes would cut directly across the interests of the union bureaucracy by constricting its dues income.

Rauner, for his part, has shown no interest in negotiating. In fact, during his campaign for governor, he had ominously threatened that "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." This refers 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 fact, after AFSCME announced the holding of the strike vote, Rauner threatened to replace striking workers with personnel drawn from the Illinois National Guard. He also recently unveiled a web site where people from around the state could indicate their interest in working as scabs at state facilities on a temporary or even permanent basis.

Rauner, a representative of the financial aristocracy, sees himself as carrying out an assault on public sector workers like that carried out in Wisconsin by Scott Walker. Moreover, Rauner has been emboldened by the election of Trump as president, reflected in his aggressive threats to escalate the attacks on workers by use of the National Guard.

From the beginning, the budget impasse and AFSCME negotiations have reflected tactical divisions between the Democrats and the Republicans over how best to carry out an agenda of austerity on behalf of the

banks.

The Democrats in Illinois rely heavily on the services of the unions as political foot soldiers, as well as a funding source. In exchange, the unions are employed as an arm of management to enforce contract terms and concessions on workers, as well as to prevent worker anger from blowing out of control. Rauner believes he can cut out the unions, and also deliver a blow to the Democratic Party.

In contrast to Rauner's determination in carrying out his ruthless threats against state workers, AFSCME's Lynch reiterated at its press conference after the strike vote that the union would call a strike only "if no other path forward can be found." AFSCME, and the rest of the AFL-CIO bureaucracy, have made sure that state workers have remained isolated. What terrifies them more than anything else is the possibility of any strike getting out of their control.

The overwhelming strike vote demonstrates again that state workers are willing to fight. Such a fight requires a break with AFSCME and the right-wing trade union organizations. New organs of struggle must be built, rank-and-file committees independent of the unions and all capitalist parties, fighting to unite the entirety of the working class on the basis of a fight against austerity and war.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact