

10 years since the mass protests in Wisconsin

Shannon Jones
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It has been 10 years since the eruption of mass protests in the US state of Wisconsin provoked by anti-worker legislation introduced by Republican Governor Scott Walker. The mass upsurge, coming after decades in which the class struggle had been suppressed in the United States by the unions, contains important lessons for today under conditions of unprecedented social polarization in the midst of a deadly, uncontained pandemic.

The protests in Wisconsin that erupted in February 2011 coincided with an international upsurge in the class struggle in the midst of a deepening crisis of the world capitalist order following the 2008 global financial crash. US-backed dictators in Egypt and Tunisia were toppled, and protests against austerity and social inequality spread across a number of countries, including Spain, Greece, Portugal, Italy and Israel.

The Wisconsin struggle laid bare the fundamental class divisions in society, pitting the working class and its allies, including students and sections of the middle class such as farmers and small business owners, against the representatives of the ruling class. This included not only the administration of Republican Governor Scott Walker, but also the Democratic Party, the trade unions and their various pseudo-left apologists.

Shortly after taking office in early 2011, Walker introduced savage austerity measures and new legislation directed against public employees. This included sharply restricting collective bargaining rights for state workers and imposing drastic cuts on public employees that nearly doubled worker contributions to pension and health care plans.

The cuts were in line with the austerity measures imposed by the Obama administration in the wake of the 2008 financial crash. After bailing out Wall Street, the Democratic president refused to aid near bankrupt state and municipal governments.

For weeks massive protests rocked the state capital of Madison defying threats by Walker to mobilize the National Guard to put down protests. Walkouts and protests also took place in other cities. Workers expressed their solidarity with the protests in Egypt that brought down the dictatorship of Hosni Mubarak in February 2011, carrying signs declaring, “Walk like an Egyptian” and juxtaposing photos of Walker and Mubarak.

Edson, a teaching assistant at the University of Wisconsin Madison, speaking to the *World Socialist Web Site*, compared the development to the toppling of dictators in the Middle East. “When the government stops listening to us, that’s when it becomes like Egypt.”

On Tuesday, February 15, 2011, an estimated crowd of 13,000 to 20,000 protesters chanting “Kill the Bill,” demonstrated at the state capitol after the Walker-backed “budget repair” bill, originally known as Act 11, was introduced in the state assembly. Scores of young people camped out overnight at the capitol in Madison, in what would become an occupation of the building by thousands of workers and

youth.

On Wednesday, February 16, the number of protesters at the state capitol rose to 30,000, including workers from different states. Madison’s public school system was closed after 40 percent of its teachers had called in to declare a sick day in order to attend the rally. Busloads of demonstrators continued to arrive from throughout the state and beyond. Near Milwaukee, a crowd estimated at 1,500 marched on Walker’s suburban home, and 1,000 high school students staged a walkout in the city of Appleton.

In an attempt to deflect worker anger, the Wisconsin Senate’s Democratic delegation fled the state to prevent the quorum needed to pass Walker’s bill. In the weeks leading up to the governor signing the bill on March 11, the Democrats and union leaders tried to contain the protests, but they continued to grow.

On March 3, the police claimed that they found 41 rounds of ammunition outside the capitol. This was used to increase the presence of state police—who were exempted from Walker’s budget cutting measures and functioned as his Praetorian Guard. The same day Dane County Circuit Judge John Albert ordered the removal of protesters who had been occupying the capitol for more than two weeks, and the unions pressured the occupiers to leave.

On March 9, the Wisconsin Senate amended the bill and used an anti-democratic maneuver to pass it without a vote by the 14 Democrats who had fled the capitol. The day after, the Assembly passed it by a vote of 53 to 42. The crowds of workers outside the locked capitol grew from hundreds to thousands, and they surged inside the capitol. Inside protesters chanted, “General strike!”

On March 12, the day after Walker signed the bill, more than 150,000 demonstrated in Madison. The demonstration mobilized wide sections of the working class. There were references to class war and the French Revolution. One worker carried a sign with Marie Antoinette’s body and Scott Walker’s face, reading “Let them Eat Cake.” Another held a picture of a guillotine with the slogan, “We’ve Had Enough Cake!”

Despite the enormous determination of workers to defend their basic rights, the movement in Wisconsin was derailed and demobilized by the trade unions with the assistance of pseudo-left groups, such as the now defunct International Socialists Organization (ISO).

After passage of Walker’s legislation using a legally dubious parliamentary maneuver, enormous anger erupted. However, the unions used the signing of the anti-worker bill to call off the struggle. Union leaders and figures like Jesse Jackson were brought in to tell workers to “put down your picket signs and pick up your clipboards” to collect signatures to recall the governor. Others told workers to rely on lawsuits and other dead-end measures.

Instead of mobilizing workers to carry forward the fight, the unions rushed to sign a wave of concessionary contract agreements with school boards and municipalities, consistent with Walker’s demands.

They rushed to do this before the law went into effect on March 25 in order to continue the collection of union dues, prohibited by Walker's law, but only after existing contracts expired.

From the onset of the protests, the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the Wisconsin Education Association and other unions made clear their main line of opposition was not to cuts in workers' living standards but their ability to continue to collect union dues. Stripped to its essential, the unions argued that there was no need to sideline the unions by abolishing collective bargaining rights because the unions supported the cuts and could be counted on to help implement austerity.

In a March 14 article for the Milwaukee *Journal Sentinel*, Education Association Council head Mary Bell wrote, "I remind you that weeks ago we accepted the financial concessions the governor asked for to help solve our state's budget crisis."

At the same time the unions feared the movement could spark a wider struggle. Therefore, the unions worked single-mindedly to reach some sort of deal with the Walker administration that would maintain the income of the union apparatus.

As for the Democrats, including those involved in the stunt of fleeing the capitol, they boasted that they had made the deepest cuts in state history, including public employee furloughs and other concessions, under Walker's Democratic predecessor, Governor Jim Doyle, but had avoided a social explosion by "working with the unions."

In direct opposition to the unions' perspective of pressuring the Democrats, the WWS and the Socialist Equality Party campaigned for a general strike to bring down the Walker administration and force the withdrawal of the cuts. The WWS explained that the call for a general strike did not imply support for the Democrats, but raised the question of the independent political mobilization of the working class.

The call for a general strike gained wide support. The South Central Federation of Labor in Madison passed a resolution in favor of a general strike though not with any intention of carrying it out. Alice Schneiderman, a nursing student at Madison Area Technical College—which was threatened with a 30 percent cut in its budget—told the WWS, "If the Democrats make a deal with Walker, we'll have no recourse but to get together and launch a general strike."

Instead of fighting to drive Walker out of power, the unions campaigned for the recall of Republican legislators and Walker—a proposal to replace corrupt and right-wing Republican politicians with corrupt and right-wing Democratic politicians.

Providing cover and support to this bankrupt policy, pseudoleft organizations, such as the International Socialist Organization (ISO), promoted illusions that the Democratic Party could be forced to oppose the cuts.

The ISO hailed the protest by the Democratic legislators who fled the state, building up the credibility of these big business politicians who only sought to divert and wear down the mass movement and give time for the unions to betray it. Later, the ISO jumped on board the recall campaign.

After the attempt to recall Republican state legislators failed to shift the balance in the legislature, the unions and pseudo-left moved on to launch a recall campaign against Walker that was ultimately held in June 2012. That failed miserably too.

In fact, none of the Democratic candidates who faced off against Walker in the recall campaign opposed the budget cuts or pledged to rescind them. The eventual Democratic nominee, Milwaukee Mayor

Tom Barrett, boasted that he was not the choice of the unions and barely mentioned the issue of collective bargaining. Indeed, Milwaukee Mayor Barrett pushed through his own cuts based on Walker's anti-worker law.

In the 10 years since the Wisconsin protests, class tensions have escalated to an unprecedented level both in the US and internationally. Social inequality has grown exponentially, with US billionaires increasing their net worth by more than \$1 trillion, while both parties have carried out a policy of "herd immunity" that has left more than half a million Americans dead from COVID-19.

At the same time, the Biden administration is pledging to maintain "bipartisan unity" with the Republican Party, which conspired with Trump to the overthrow the government and establish a presidential dictatorship.

American democracy is in its death throes, and both parties are adopting repressive measures to suppress the growing radicalization of the working class.

Even more explosive struggles in the US and around the world are on the agenda. To take forward the fight against austerity and social inequality, the lessons of the 2011 Wisconsin struggle must be learned.

The social rights of the working class, including the right to life itself, cannot be entrusted to the unions. Workers need new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees, that are committed to fight for what workers need, not what the corporations, big business politicians and the corrupt unions say is affordable.

The industrial mobilization of the working class against the ruling class' criminal response to the pandemic and plans for savage austerity must be combined with the building of a powerful political movement of the working class against both corporate-controlled parties and for socialism.

This means joining and building the Socialist Equality Party to unite workers in the US and internationally in the fight for the working class to take political power, expropriate the billionaires and reorganize society to meet human needs not private profit.

For a summary of these events and links to our articles and videos, see the WWS topic page "The 2011 mass protests in Wisconsin."



To contact the WWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wws.org/contact