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Thousands in Wisconsin demonstrate against cuts

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Over the past two days, thousands of workers in a number of cities and towns in Wisconsin have demonstrated against a bill backed by Governor Scott Walker that would force drastic pay cuts on nearly 175,000 state, local and university employees, and effectively outlaw their right to strike. The Republican governor has put the National Guard on alert and has threatened to deploy them in order to implement his demands.

<http://divergences.be/sites/divergences.be/local/cache-vignettes/L205xH105/wisconsin-protest-6fd56.jpg>

Police estimated 13,000 demonstrated outside the state capitol in Madison on Tuesday, far exceeding the expectations of the public sector unions who called the rally as a lobbying effort to sway a handful of Republican legislators to oppose Walker's bill. Protesters began arriving at noon, including hundreds of students who walked out of a local high school and marched miles to join the protest.

Tuesday's Madison demonstration follows a march on the capitol estimated at 1,100, led by University of Wisconsin graduate students, which took place the day before. Another large demonstration is expected to take place in Madison on Wednesday, with workers and students busing in from throughout the state. Large protests have also taken place in Milwaukee, Eau Claire and Superior.

The bill, which could pass through the state legislature as early as today, would require workers to almost double their deductions for health care and retirement benefits. According to various analyses, these added contributions would equate to anywhere from an 8 to 20 percent pay cut.

The measure would also make strikes among state workers illegal, giving the governor unilateral authority to fire workers who "participate in an organized action to stop or slow work," or who "are absent for three days without approval of the employer." It would remove the right of unions to negotiate pensions, retirement and benefits, and would prohibit the union dues check-off for government workers. These changes would also apply to childcare workers, home health care workers, and employees of the University of Wisconsin system and its hospital arm.

The bill also ends health insurance coverage and retirement benefits for temporary workers hired by the state, apparently including certain categories of graduate student labor.

Both the magnitude of the cuts and the provocative way Walker has demanded them have created a backlash among Wisconsin workers and youth. In announcing his preparations to deploy the National Guard the governor implicitly threatened violence against those opposing the draconian cuts, saying the troops were "prepared ... for whatever the governor, their commander-in-chief, might call for. I am fully prepared for whatever may happen."

In the face of this provocation the unions that organized the demonstrations—the American, Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the Wisconsin Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers—have offered no strategy to fight, insisting instead that protesters appeal to state Republicans and Democrats to rein in Walker.

But Democratic governors in New York, California and other states are imposing draconian cuts too, along with the Obama administration on the federal level. Walker's predecessor, Democrat Jim Doyle, in 2009 demanded massive cuts to the state budget, including a 5 percent across-the-board funding cut to state agencies, reducing aid to public schools by \$290 million, laying off hundreds of state workers and imposing a two-year pay freeze on the remainder.

The World Socialist Web Site spoke to two University of Wisconsin graduate students who participated in Tuesday's Madison demonstration, Scott Prinster of the Department of the History of Science and Jacquelyn Gill of the Geography Department.

"You had the food service workers and the teachers and the childcare providers and Teamsters and pipefitters," Prinster said. "It's a reminder of how broadly destructive the budget cuts are. It was inspiring to see how many different people were working for the same thing."

Gill echoed these sentiments. "What was so powerful to me about today's rally was that so many people came together from all over Wisconsin," she said. "The state has a reputation of being blue [Democrat] in Madison, and to a lesser extent Milwaukee, and bright red [Republican] in the rest of the state. I stood with iron workers, Oscar Mayer plant workers, firefighters (who are exempt from the bill, but came out anyway in support), teachers, state and municipal employees, nurses—everyone."

The mass protests in Egypt that led to the downfall of dictator Hosni Mubarak were very much on the minds of the Wisconsin demonstrators, who held signs with slogans like "Protest Like an Egyptian," "If Egypt Can Have Democracy, Why Can't Wisconsin?" and calling the governor "Hosni Walker."

A day earlier, a protest of several hundred took place in Milwaukee, Wisconsin's largest city, at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Teaching assistants there could see pay cuts as high as 20 percent, and many research assistants would lose their health insurance coverage completely.

"Some speakers made allusions to the protests this month that forced the president of Egypt to resign," the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel reported. "A few in the crowd waved shoes in the air, a sign of disrespect in Arab culture that was used by some of the Egyptian protesters."

The speed with which the protests have spread and grown is striking. Monday's protest in Madison saw a crowd estimated at 1,100 march from the University of Wisconsin campus down State Street to the capitol building and to the office door of the governor. The demonstration had originally been called by a union of teaching assistants to protest cuts to the university system's budget, but it was expanded in the wake of Walker's provocative statements against state workers. Demonstrators chanted, "Kill this bill."

The size of the Monday demonstration, only a tenth the size of the Tuesday event, surprised its organizers. It was evidently joined by many undergraduate students as it made its way along State Street. According to the Badger Herald, "The ranks of the protesters continued to swell throughout the march from Memorial Union to the steps of the Capitol."

"The student body is such a powerful force, and we can contribute one of the strongest voices around that can do something about it," said Markus Nevil, a university undergraduate.

Also on Monday, over 100 students staged a walkout from the high school in the small industrial town of Stoughton in opposition to Walker's bill.

In Eau Claire, a standing-room only crowd numbering in the hundreds packed a junior high school auditorium on Monday, again surprising event organizers.

In the town of Superior, in the far northwestern corner of the state, 200 to 300 attended a Monday meeting in opposition to the cuts at the University of Wisconsin, Superior.

16 February 2011

Post-scriptum :

<http://www.wsws.org/articles/2011/feb2011/wvid-f17.shtml>.