Wisconsin Protests: Looking Back

The following article was sent for publication to Insurgent Notes. Since the time of writing this a federal circuit court judge has ruled against parts of the Act 10 legislation, in as far as it targets only certain sectors of the state workforce (teachers, clerical workers, and blue collar workers). The newly installed Chief of Capitol police has had his tiny force which patrols the State Capital grounds, arresting anyone showing up at the building with a sign, it cannot be emphasized enough that it was the unions and union militants, above and beyond the other radical reformists present at the protests, who put workers firmly on the conveyor belt to support for defeat within a neo-reformist framework of the Democratic Party. This effectively placed the entire focus of workers demands into the realm of auxiliary support for a ruling bourgeois faction. The nature of the unions is one of achieving recognition in order to negotiate a deal with the employing class, placing unions within the orbit of that faction of the bourgeoisie most willing to strike a bargain with the unions. Neither reformism nor the creation of a separate radical union apparatus can alter this. In fact it was the most militant left-reformists who were the most loyal to the unions. The imperative here is to break from the perspective of maintaining capitalistpherds towards the overthrow of capitalism itself.

A little over a year has come and gone since the protests in Wisconsin and already there are a half a dozen books out on the subject, all of the reformist liberal democratic variety. While all efforts have been expended on electing a Democratic Party governor, the effects of the cuts and rewriting of work rules is already being felt. The Democratic Party succeeded in asserting control from the start through the party apparatus and the state workers unions. When the portable toilets showed up it was obvious that the Democrats were in charge.

From the start the unions demanded only that the traditional bargaining structure remain intact. All the other austerity measures they agreed to accept. Since then changes to seniority and transfer rules have been pushed through, along with hefty increases in insurance and pension contributions taken out of workers take-home pay and an end to third party grievance procedures. Those who would seek the government’s seat have opposed none of these measures.

The rewriting of popular history provides little background and leaves little room for criticism of the Democratic Party’s own role in initiating these attacks on workers. From the previous Governor’s “futuristic days” to the current Governor’s pay and benefits cuts. The energy of the thousands that gathered for the protests was effectively dissipated by its own deference to the orators of bourgeois reformism. While the unions did not oppose the concessions, the absence of the union in the workplace has given credence to the orators of bourgeois reformism.

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One thing that is clear is that the debate between reformism and the other radical movements of the period has been decisively settled by the act of organizing the workers. From the start the unions demanded only that the traditional bargaining structure remain intact. All the other austerity measures they agreed to accept. Since then changes to seniority and transfer rules have been pushed through, along with hefty increases in insurance and pension contributions taken out of workers take-home pay and an end to third party grievance procedures. Those who would seek the government’s seat have opposed none of these measures.

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Governor Walker threatened to call out the National Guard if state workers went on strike as the Democratic loyal opposition had already pacified them.

Crushing American Federalization of State County and Municipal Employees in its birthplace, where the OWS movement was founded, was meant as a powerful message to workers that all resistance is futile. Large sections of the capitalist media painted this state-workers version of Woodstock as if the Bohemians were at the State Capitol building itself. A handful of incidents involving minor damage and tear were blown out of all proportion to make it wrongly appear as though there was actual violence occurring. The hostility towards the state workers was pretty evident when religious fundamentalists and handfuls of Tea Partiers came down to deliberately provoke fights, walking up to people and insulting them. The fact that the protest had gone on for a week, where the numbers of protesters were from 80,000 to 120,000 before the national capitalist media was reluctantly forced to take notice.

For any capitalist enterprise in the wealthy imperialist power centers the dominant mode of thought in controlling labor costs has increasingly focused on what is termed “labor efficiency.” This is where we dismantled some of the social democrats, and many of the SDG leaders (to pay for legislation we withdrew pensions and benefits the employers agreed to. Bankruptcy is one of the standard ways of dealing with an enterprise from any state from California to General Motors, Wisconsin the model of a modern state capital with a pliant electorate pay as the employee “contribution” to health insurance and retirement benefits was increased dramatically. The lowest tiers of the Wisconsin state civil service, the workers earning starting salaries of $13,200 per year, were hit the hardest as the employee “contributions” was an across the board cut affecting those workers with the least ability to cope with the loss in income.

The passing of the austerity bill, made it such that the union could only bargain on wage increases up to but not beyond the rate of the Consumer Price Index of inflation. Gone was any bargaining over working conditions or anything else. Certification elections for unions were to take place every two years. Most of the unions on the UW Campus decertified themselves from 80,000 to 120,000 before the national capitalist media was reluctantly forced to take notice.

Walker accomplished exactly what the capitalists wanted, a massive reduction in labor costs in the public sector. There is little chance that workers will willingly choose a revolutionary unknown over a reactionary ‘lesser of two evils’ unless there is a strong enough revolutionary voice present. At the protests workers took the first steps in recognizing a need to fight in their interests. The next step in realizing that their interests are diametrically opposed to the capitalist class its political representatives. Revolutionary can take a first step by organizing territorial workers groups to open a space to build up that revolutionary voice.

For more information about our organization and answers to frequently asked questions: http://www.leftcom.org/en/about-us

For more information email: usa@leftcom.org

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“We are called internationalists because we believe that the interests of the exploited are the same all over the world, and that communism can not be achieved in a single geographic area, a myth peddled as true by Stalin. We are, therefore, bitterly opposed to Stalinism in all its varieties, for too long taken to be communism, both by the bourgeoisie and many generations of workers who looked to it in good faith when the ownership of industries, distribution, land, etc., went from private to state hands, leaving capitalist relations and its components (commodities, money, wages, profits, borders etc.) largely intact. The task of convincing a form of capitalism, state capitalism. After 1917 the economic blockade of the Soviet Union and the failure of the world revolution in the West meant that the revolution was transformed into its opposite, eventually becoming an imperialist bloc that would collapse after only seventy years.”

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