

Wisconsin state workers: “It’s the modern feudal society”

By Tobin Reese
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The *World Socialist Web Site* recently spoke to two Wisconsin state employees about the implications of Governor Scott Walker’s attack on worker rights. The workers discussed the severe impact on benefits and also reviewed the role of the official trade unions and the Democratic Party in the process.

The interview was conducted on the afternoon of March 9, the day Walker’s “budget repair” bill was passed. Since then, the Democratic Party and the unions are working to demobilize the massive working class opposition that shook the state.

Teachers unions throughout the state have agreed to concessions contracts that incorporate all of Walker’s demands. According to the Associated Press, “Since Walker unveiled the bill on Feb. 11, between 50 and 100 of the state’s 424 [school] districts have approved deals with unions, said Bob Butler,” an attorney for the Wisconsin Association of School Boards. “The vast majority of them include benefit concessions consistent with what Walker proposed under the new collective bargaining law,” Butler said.”

Along with Democratic Party officials, the unions are seeking to channel opposition behind an election for the Wisconsin Supreme Court on April 5 and a recall campaign targeting eight of the Republican State Senators. At demonstrations on Saturday, workers were asked to report back to work and “trade in rally signs for clipboards”

The WSWS sat down with Katherine Presswood, 49, and Tim Handland, 62, both accountants in the UW Madison Grants department, to discuss the implications and the political issues involved in the attack on workers’ rights and benefits.

WSWS: How will the new budget affect your lives?

KP: Right now I pay \$89 per month for health insurance, and this will go up to \$210. The state

currently takes only 0.2 percent of our income for pension contribution; this is going up to 5.8 percent. Once the plan is fully carried out, it will be effectively a 12 percent pay cut. This is a huge cut, and with the cost of living in Madison I am not paid well enough as it is. Also, even if I absolutely couldn’t afford the new insurance costs, I won’t be able to opt out until the next open enrollment period.

TH: From a financial standpoint, I will have \$5,517 taken off my salary for the year.

WSWS: There is a long history of struggle by the working class to attain their right to bargain for better wages, working conditions, insurance, and retirement. Essentially, the elimination of collective bargaining is a return to the 1920s—it will now be illegal for workers to fight for many of the things they have won over decades of difficult victories and bloodshed.

TH: The elimination of collective bargaining rights—essentially saying you can’t negotiate over working conditions—takes away all protections that employees have worked for over the last 50-60 years. Vacation time, better working conditions, having a voice for complaints—now they can just do an evaluation and terminate you for anything they want to.

With every contract, the union says they will get this and we want that, but then down the road they accept what the state puts on the table. There are small language changes, but the unions have always taken whatever the state has given us. In this process we have given up holidays, longevity pay, and made retirement concessions. All this and we have to pay \$44 per month in union dues.

As a kid, I saw what unions were doing for people. They helped people get better wages and it brought up the standard of living. Now the union has lost its voice, and the power has all gone to the corporation. Starting

in the late 60's early 70's the unions were losing their power; there have been fundamental changes.

KP: The unions are supposed to be one voice for the many; instead they are pitting us against each other. It is an absolute agenda with someone high up, things are becoming extremely polarized.

WSWS: During the past few years, including since 2008 when Obama and his administration came into Washington, there have been severe cuts in spending on public education. Walker's bill is a continuation of this. What will be the effects on students here in Wisconsin?

KP: I don't know where these education cuts come from, but the administration is constantly pushing them out—it's all part of some big money-churning industry. They have been reorganizing the schools and separating kids from their friends and teachers. Then they call them "failing schools"—calling it a failing school is bad for everyone; the students, teachers and parents all feel as though they are to blame. No one benefits with the No Child Left Behind process putting all this emphasis on standardized testing. It is totally the wrong idea. The fact that the Democrats helped put that into place I find appalling.

TH: The situation is similar in many places in the US. I've heard that near Disneyland in Florida, 25 percent of kids are living in poverty. That's the highest rate since the Great Depression—you have people sleeping in their vans, and kids are talking about being hungry. You have parents stressing out because they can't scrape together enough to feed their kids, let alone themselves. This is supposed to be the greatest country in the world, and look what is happening to a whole generation of children. They can't learn; they are going backwards.

WSWS: How have people around you been affected by the economic crisis and the last few years of budget cutting?

TH: Where I live there are a lot of farmers and poorly paid workers. Some of them voted for Walker, but their views are changing now that they see what his budget is going to do. These severe cuts in health care will affect seniors, farmers, and many people who are only making \$10 per hour. They are saying, I thought this was just Madison, but now it's happening to me. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that if you cut \$900 million from a budget, something has to give—farmers

and people in small towns are starting to wake up.

KP: My husband is highly educated and had to file for bankruptcy after losing his job. I have an undergrad student staying with me in order to afford rent. There are kids asking, "I wonder if it's even going to make a difference to have a college degree?" The intent is to create the people who have and the people who don't; and those who don't, just have to put up with it.

TH: I've heard that Warren Buffett pays less in taxes than his secretary. There is not a single law passed that isn't geared toward making people rich who are already rich. In the background here there is a saying, "If you're not making it, it is your fault!"

Bill Gates, Buffett, these people are presented as our heroes. It's the modern feudal society; that's how it is.

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