

Report from the Battle for Wisconsin - I - Part 3 to 7

Monday 28 February 2011, by [Correspondent\(s\)](#) (Date first published: 26 February 2011).

This is a report from a Madison comrade, Andrew, who has been heavily involved with the protests there. He makes great observations on the culture of the protests, how such movements are organized, contradictions between the labor bureaucracy and rank-and-file workers, and all kinds of other stuff you definitely won't learn about in the mainstream media.

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Part seven: How do we win?

February 26, 2011 - 1:43am

Its pretty clear that we are in an all out class war here and everyone seems to know it. Organized labor all across the United States knows it, they're sending people here and looking at what to do at home; non-union workers know it and they're moving forward their demands and tactics (like today's occupation of the GOP office by ADAPT disability activists); and obviously, Walker, the Legislature, the Koch Brothers and the entire capitalist class knows it and they're out for a complete crushing victory.

There was a moment yesterday when the question was posed, "Will the Republicans reign in Walker?" The answer, I think, is that they will not. Executives at Koch Industries issued a statement saying that after the leaked Walker prank they are more determined than ever to push this thing through. They know that backing away from Walker will cede some ground and they've realized that if they can get this thing through completely as is, it will deal a crushing blow to the movement that's emerged. But their decision is not without its costs: the Wisconsin Professional Police Association issued a statement saying that they will not clear the capitol out, as demanded by the Legislature, and in fact they will be joining the sleep-in. Moreover, the scene inside during the Assembly vote this morning was unbelievable: representatives were throwing paper and cups of water, confronting Republicans chanting "SHAME! SHAME!" There are serious cracks in the order of things, and while there are still many legislators, State Patrol and Capitol Police who may be

following orders, these are signs of defection.

As more layers come out against the bill, we're once again at the position of looking not only at what a win is, but how does that happen? The win here has to be a complete defeat of the bill, no concessions. That's had to evolve, but as the alliance of forces has come together and we see how much both sides have invested in this, a win must mean that the whole bill goes. If the union-busting parts are thrown out and the rest goes through, not only do we have the objective reality of cuts to everything imaginable, the movement coalition will be shattered because non-union workers will know that they were abandoned. What's more, we know that the full budget will be unveiled on Tuesday, which will be even worse than this bill. If we have any hope of fighting that budget, we have to have the morale and experience of winning that must come from beating the bill.

So how do we do it? How do we actually kill the whole bill, what does that look like? This is the trickier part. For people who get this far, the notion is typically that we find three Republican Senators to change their vote and we're in the clear. I think that's a mistake. First off, we have no guarantee that if they agree to change their votes that they will actually vote that way if the fourteen Senators are recalled. Walker himself said that he wanted to bait them with just this kind of move. Second, and this is less serious, even if we could win like that, the way in which we will matters. If they agree to change their votes and the Democrats come back, that kind of victory would be credited more to the Senators than to the people who made it happen; it has the danger of co-opting the independent working class movement. Obviously, if it comes down to this kind of victory or no victory, take the fucking Senators' for the victory!

What seems the most sensible, the safest and surest way to beat the bill is to force them to withdraw it. If the Assembly vote is ruled illegal (they violated Assembly rules), it'll buy some more time and it gives more possibility for them to withdraw the bill from that chamber. More likely, it'll have to be withdrawn from the Senate since they're the ones that have the most political pressure on them and have become the symbol for where the movement's power lies.

It's not for me to say which course must be taken because it's contingent on the development of the struggle. But what is clear about both options is that the only way the bill can be either voted down or withdrawn is with immense popular pressure. We've gotten this far because of the pressure the movement has put on, through the sit-ins blocking the Legislature from meeting, the sleep-ins at the capitol, the enormous rallies and now the actions on specific targets. The Assembly Democrats have only gone as far as they have because of the critical mass of people and to kill this thing the social cost of the bill will have to raise even more.

It remains to be seen if Walker's maneuvers, intimidating teachers and doctors, working through the courts and militarizing the capitol, will have the effect he's hoping they'll have, or if the coalition can survive the increasing presence of the international unions and their organizing staff who are attempting to undercut the influence and impact of local militants, but if today has shown us anything it's that this is a general working class revolt and we should expect more surprises.

Part Six: War of Maneuver

February 24, 2011 - 12:14pm

The strategic and tactical assessments of the situation have shifted a few times since this started last week—our goals and objectives have had to change with the developments here, the idea of what is possible and what a win means. Its all changed and changed again. When we arrived at what seemed like a kind of stalemate over the weekend, both sides were digging in and preparing to deal huge blows: Walker and the Legislature were expected to press the police and push the bill; workers had the threat of a general strike, a huge presence at the capitol and a lot of unrest in the state. Monday night/Tuesday early morning, there was a sense of immediacy that broke the interlude—people on the ground were getting ready to defend against a push by briefing each other on direct actions, legal support and emergency support to unions.

For whatever reason, that didn't happen and we have shifted out of the war of position, where we use the entrenched strength we've built for large advances, into a war of maneuver where smaller skirmishes are used to approach an advantage. Walker announced that if unions don't back down and let the bill pass, he will issue layoffs to public employees by the thousands—notice have already been sent in advance. As mentioned before, the UW Hospital is also putting pressure on doctors who wrote medical notes for the teacher sick-outs to try and intimidate them into dissociating from the movement. Walker also revealed in a leaked conversation he thought he was having with David Koch that he is also looking to the courts to rule that once the Senate session has commenced the Senators don't need to physically be there anymore, which would allow the Senate to vote on the bill. As they're shifting their strategy, they're also reigning in the rogue elements who threaten the plan—there's a rumor that Chancellor Biddy Martin may be fired for her (now) overzealous advance on the New Badger Partnership for the UW.

On the workers' side, they've embraced the war of maneuver by picking strategic targets as well. On Tuesday, workers picketed outside of M&I Bank, a major contributor to the Walker campaign; Wednesday a rally was called on the Monona Terrace to have a presence outside the meeting of the Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce where Walker was giving the keynote address—and Jimmy Hoffa Jr was also reported to have been in attendance! An action has been called today at the Koch Brothers' lobbying office in Madison; students are organizing a solidarity response to the UW's harassment of doctors and a rally has been called Friday at the meeting of the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin as they discuss the proposal to split the UW from the system, thereby privatizing the university.

That said, the ground has also shifted inside the capitol where they've relaxed some of their tactics and a stable community has arisen, far less dependent on the TAA or other big players. A food table has been erected on the second floor, a departure from the TAA's table, which had been the central food area previously. A medical/healthcare station has been set up with the generous aid of a local pharmacy cooperative and a hall has been designated for families and children. The information station has of course remained, but people staffing these tables have adopted name tags and are developing a more structured rotation to ensure staffing. Where Tuesday morning police had been encircling the space, tearing down posters and seemed to be making a play for control, as of yesterday it appeared to be much more like the atmosphere late last week—plastered with posters, chanting and sharing, TVs broadcasting the activity of the assembly inside and workers watching closely, responding with cheers or boos. The Assembly is moving slowly through at least a hundred amendments, with Democrats making motions for increased pay for public defenders and other social services as a projection of a different, oppositional spirit of what government should be doing. It is complicated to relate to as independent activists, but objectively necessary.

Backing up for a minute, why has the strategy changed? Quite clearly, the Republicans have no interest in compromising—Walker himself said in the “prank” call that he will not budge and that's how you win, by breaking the other side. Its undercut the Democrats plan to shoot for a bill without the union-busting and let the rest pass. Its just not a possibility, and hearing Walker say that

strengthens the resolve of workers to fight the WHOLE bill. Unfortunately, while the Democrats have been undermined, the labor bureaucracy hasn't as such. Their signs and language still point to the demand of dropping the attack on collective bargaining, and the sense is that if they get that, they'll leave. It's uneven to the point that they are willing to harness the power of a general strike to get the Legislature to drop the union-busting aspects of the bill—but if you're preparing for that kind of power, why not go for the complete victory? Many rank'n filers are arriving at the demand for the whole bill to go, but the union bureaucracy's printed placards and legitimate power makes it difficult for them to embrace the demand as a collective grouping.

As that's happening, more layers of the working class have turned out to oppose the other attacks, specifically the attacks on public health, transportation, affirmative action, reproductive rights, sexual orientation, and democratic channels. My read is that if the entire bill is going to be defeated, the alliance between unionists and the layers of the working poor and the diverse public have to be strengthened so that the Republicans don't offer a concession on collective bargaining and the unions leave the rest of these people high and dry. That in part rests in the common identification as workers, or at least as people who have a similar relationship to capital (though obviously not the same).

A final word: It has become clear that this is a war that is opening up new fronts and developments in other places will affect our chances of victory here. Having 10,000 protestors in Ohio is helping us win here. Having a politician's rebellion in Indiana, leading to them dropping Right-to-Work (for less) legislation is helping us here. Having solidarity demonstrations across the country is helping us, and its helping us to have people come from around the country boosting our strength on the ground at what both sides are calling "ground zero". But Walker knows this too and its equally significant that Oklahoma has voted to repeal collective bargaining. Its no coincidence that all these bills are being debated right now across the country, and their language is nearly identical so its obvious that there is a central place that has developed this project and they need to be pressured as well.

Part Five: The Advance

February 22, 2011 - 1:17pm

Without a doubt, today is going to decide the course of the struggle. The last two and a half days have been a pause, with folks moving into position for Tuesday while guarding their backs in case of any unexpected developments. Rumors of strikes have come and gone depending on what the collective sense is of who's in the lead and what the balance of forces is. The anxiety into Monday was in looking for some maneuvers or developments that would put one side in front of the other, a step forward by some local who to announce an action or a new position on the bill by anyone in the government, but basically everyone has just dug in and stayed the course.

Here are the developments that are going to affect everyone today: The legislature and the police are not waiting around any more and they're making the first moves today. Late last night, police announced that they would be closing the top floors of the capitol "for cleaning", and then closed off the South and West wings of the building—where the Assembly and Senate meet. Police have been meeting with a few "representatives" of people who have been staying in the capitol, so a few TAA members and younger folks started marshaling the crowd staying in last night, telling them to leave

those places to preserve the good relationship with the police. Unfortunately, for a lot of folks who have been staying inside the reason they're there has changed from the necessity of testifying and physically stopping a vote to being part of a social scene and preserving the feeling of community that emerged last week. Until a group of us protested and vocalized that we should not be telling people to up and leave because police say so, there was basically no debate about what our role is inside the capitol building. And people are putting the cards on the table: TAA and students close to them are telling people that this vote is going to happen, and its going to go through so we should just let it and its important to preserve our amicable relationship with the police; militants are saying this is the stand we have to make. Obviously no one is advocating confrontations, its just a matter of having our interests remain independent so we can do what we need to do.

They're securing the capitol for a vote tomorrow and they're not letting anything stall out any longer. Police are blocking off a ton of space so that no one gets even close to stopping a vote; they've set up metal detectors and police dogs. They're smart enough to let people stay in the building, they're just keeping them away from vulnerable points and using the cordial relationship they've built with occupiers to let it happen. Police are planning on letting people stay to keep up the feeling like people are participating while stripping them of all the power to actually affect the meeting of the votes.

The political maneuvering itself in the Legislature is nothing short of incredible. The Assembly is going to meet, they have a clear majority and they are going to push it through. The only stall for time are the dozens of proposed amendments by Assembly Democrats. The Senate is furious about being embarrassed like they have been and they're going to start a harassment strategy—they're going to start taking votes on unrelated issues that they know Senate Democrats are against to raise the cost of their absence. More than that, they're proposing to split parts of the bill and move them into non-financial legislature which requires a smaller quorum that they do have. Its unclear if they can do this or if they even want to—putting union-busing legislation in non-financial bills is an admission that this has nothing to do with a budget crisis. The outlier here is the rumor that a Senate Republican is going to vote against splitting the bill. The fourteen missing Senators have a hard road ahead, but they know that the only leverage they have is staying away to keep the financial bill from passing; Republicans have clear majority on all the other legislation anyway. Whatever happens, there is an advance coming for the bill today (Tuesday).

Outside of the capitol, the field is incredibly volatile. More and more layers have come out against the bill: the State Street business association issued a statement against the bill, people are carrying signs declaring the support of suburbs ("Verona stands against the bill!"), teachers from across the country are coming in packs. Ian's Pizza, near the capitol at the top of state street, has a map of all the places in the world that have paid for pizzas to be sent to protestors.

Unbelievably, Governor Walker went to a trendy restaurant on the capitol square yesterday and was refused service. There are reports of a lot of rallies in towns across Wisconsin, though the AFL-CIO doesn't want to broadcast it for fear of counter-rallies. The South Central Federation of Labor, local AFL-CIO council, voted to endorse a general strike and demands to kill the entire bill yesterday. They have no binding power, but as a symbol it does carry weight to let people know that these things are legitimate. The rank and file here are obviously pissed about the concessions their union leaders have made, and it fuels their fire that Republicans have again rejected the concessions. The compromise strategy the labor bureaucracy has been banking on seems like it might not actually pan out, and if that's the case it boosts the rank and file's sense that they have to fight to win or all is lost.

The UW Hospital system is also investigating doctors who have been writing sick notes for teachers who went on sick-strikes. They're trying to clamp down on them to ensure that we don't see a

second wave of sick strikes this week and some students have been collecting signatures telling the hospital board to cease or they'll organize solidarity actions. Walker has also announced that if labor doesn't step down and accept the bill, he's going to start issuing lay-offs next week.

Right now there are too many factors to make a guess on what is going to happen; the police and the legislature have the capitol and the field is very unpredictable—it could explode with everyone so revved up. All we know is that what happens today is going to determine the course of struggle and move one side or the other towards a win.

Part Four: Battle Plans

February 21, 2011 - 10:57am

We're into the fifth day now and its starting to take its toll—I'm pretty worn so hopefully this report is holding the standard. The capitol square has temporarily depopulated to the point that it almost looks like a normal business day—of course its Sunday and most people don't do business with KILL THE BILL placards and "I am MTI" pins. The local newspapers are saying that the small turnout today is because of the bad weather (it's grossly cold and wet) and that shows the resolve of protesters here. But people have been here days and nights and since there's no imminent threat its a good time to go home, take care of yourself and get ready for the next day. Some are leaving Madison, back to the rest of Wisconsin for life, work or until the next round, so allies from around the country have come to take their places and keep a presence. And even though things seem pretty mellow, there's a lot going on behind the scenes.

Union locals are meeting today to figure out what their game plan is. WEAC's done a full 360: two weeks ago they agreed to the worst concessions for Wisconsin teachers, only to cancel school last Thursday and Friday to get teachers here, and now they're back to their usual shenanigans as President Mary Bell ordered teachers who aren't excused for President's Day back to work. AFSCME local 171 and 2412 had small attendance at their joint meeting (70 people out of 1000) and voted to endorse Council 24 Executive Director Marty Beil's concession to have public workers contribute to their pensions and take a serious paycut—all that after his threats to call strikes for his public workers just a few months ago. MTI is in for at least another day, having called off school for Monday before they return on Tuesday. Taking their place, the IBEW International President Ed Hill will be here Tuesday and has called for electricians to come out in their hardhats. The Wisconsin Law Enforcement Association (police union) is having internal issues and Tuesday they'll decide who's side they're on.

A concert has been planned for Monday to rejuvenate the workers as they turn out on their Furlough Day, and Tom Morello and a few other left-ish musicians are playing a set billed "The Battle of Wisconsin" (nice name). In response, the Democratic Party has organized a competing event, a fundraiser for the fourteen senators in Rockford. They've named their recital "The Concessions Concert". I think that show's what's on their minds. On that subject, its worth mentioning that Walker and the Legislature really don't want to make any concessions—there hasn't been a single report of a political change up inside the legislature. Just as the movement knows they're making history, Walker knows that he's going to make history if he gets this thing through and that he'll be the toast of the town. Someone asked about the Recall petitions, but they've been drowned in a sea of "Russ for Guv" signs and 2012 election briefs. The Democrats probably would rather not have

people feel like they have collective power over the political process, so no recall from them.

While we're waiting for the next fight, it's important to point out the strengths of the workers' position here. First, Madison schools will have been closed down for four days Monday with their sick-strikes. That's huge. They've stopped business as usual, forced the district to respond and come out on top; Mayor Dave's injunction was thrown out of court. MTI also did some groundwork to open childcare centers for children in need while schools have been out. The local press is running spots on the community's disapproval, which I can't get a read on, but this whole week I've seen more kids with "Union Power!" signs than I can even count—the recall petition I signed Friday was held by a nine-year old with freckles.

The second strength is that the state government is incapacitated. With fourteen senators still out of the state, it's not just the Budget Repair bill that's not going to move—legislation can't proceed as normal. The State Assembly didn't do any business except for hearings on the bill from Tuesday on, and they were eventually forced to adjourn until Tuesday. So while we tend to look to strikes as the sole source of power, we have hit some kind of soft spot.

But what's the strategy here? How are we going to manage a win? No one has come out to really say this, but I think that militants on the ground and the union bureaucracy agree that there's a dual focus. We need to have control inside the capitol to block the legislature and stop movement on the bill itself, and we need to be out in the field with the rank and file since they're the only ones who can secure the win. The AFL-CIO, WEAC and SEIU have rented out at least five suites in the Concourse Hotel to coordinate labor activity outside the capitol: meeting with politicians, figuring out where to send their army of staffers, arranging rallies, and mass producing approved placards. Their job is to convince the rank and file that they can't win this and should accept concessions that will keep their unions together and let the rest of the bill pass. Naturally, our mission is to make sure that doesn't happen and to give workers the confidence to stick to the demands they were making on Thursday: the whole thing has got to die and we need to kill it. Inside the capitol, the TAA leadership is working with police to try to "keep things civil", and they're doing their redirects to activists on the ground—throwing people into phone-banking and using cleaning supplies to tidy up the building. More than a few TAA members have left their battle room in frustration and are looking to activists on the floor for direction.

Rumors come every night that the police are going to force people out—they've blocked more hallways and increased police presence inside. Saturday night/Sunday morning they had a squad of riot cops outside the entrance doors to the building. They're also starting intimidation tactics and counting as well as tearing down peoples' banners. At one point in the night, some AFSCME workers saw police tearing down their signs and demanded that they put them right back up, so they obviously know what it means to have these posters as signs of worker solidarity and power. Folks coming from out of town have been really taken by things inside the capitol and placed a high premium on activity inside, but keeping the capitol is only important because it's much more grassroots controlled (spatially it's difficult to plan an event in there), it keeps morale up and it stalls the vote. But the decider in this fight is going to be what labor does out in the field.

Monday is going to be an advance to see what direction the movement will take, concessions or no concessions, and probably most of the hot fighting is going to be Tuesday.

Forward to Tuesday! On Wisconsin!

Part three: : War of Attrition

(This was written late Thursday, February 17.)

First, I think we're all shocked at what's happening here. There's obviously been a build-up to this point, a few test battles in union-busting public sector workers and of course the (democratic) legislature stalling out and then rejecting state contracts, but the pace at which things have proceeded this week is mindblowing. Walker introduced the bill on Friday with intent to get it passed Wednesday, which pissed people off even more than the contents of the bill already had.

Second, protests have definitely gone above and beyond what union leadership had planned. Monday's action was called by the graduate student union (TAA) to deliver valentines to the governor, "I love my university, don't break my heart", followed by a strict lobbying plan. The day then kind of fizzled. Tuesday was intended to be the same but bigger, but things blew up when firefighters showed up despite being exempt from the cuts and high school students walked out of class as well. Then there was a community forum that encouraged militancy [\[1\]](#), and as rallies kept the capitol packed throughout the night, students and workers somewhat spontaneously decided to sleep in at the capitol and keep public testimonies going all night long. The TAA initially was against it because they want to appear as good partners to make things work, but have since embraced it and then called for another sleep-in the following night. Madison Teachers soft struck by sicking-out on Wednesday, though not an official union action, and it forced school closures in the city; shortly after WEAC (NEA affiliate for Wisconsin teachers) announced Wisconsin teachers would not show up to work Thursday and Friday to be part of demonstrations.

The union bureaucracy has been lagging behind workers here. The number of handmade signs are roughly equal to mass produced placards, with all kinds of witty takes on pop culture and Wisconsin traditions, but the actions workers are taking are definitely directing how things are shaping up here. The official program of speakers were the same two days in a row—which I think says that unions were expecting a different crowd of people to come for lobbying either day. In their meeting this morning, the AFL-CIO were prepared for a loss, but the mood of workers here is increasingly confident as private sector unions and skilled trades have stuck it out for the last few days. Now it seems like unions are ready to invest in this fight; presidents of the internationals of the NEA and AFSCME were in town today, and its rumored that Trumka and Jesse Jackson will be here tomorrow.

The mood is increasingly confident and the sense of solidarity here is unlike anything I've ever experienced. Madison feels radically different and working class issues have hegemony for the moment—a few examples: two plumbers in the bathroom talking to each other, "This isn't about parties, its about the working class,"; walking downtown people all over are watching tv reports in the streets and discussing what this means for working people while cars honk approvingly at AFSCME members crossing the walk. Firefighters in uniform led demonstrators by bagpipe to a municipal building to get support for a motion to ratify municipal contracts now should the bill pass; they were cheered the whole way through. At the capitol tonight, workers chanted "We are Wisconsin!" and "Union!", and to me they're speaking about the kind of unionism represented by the solidarity in the room, not just collective bargaining. Signs are everywhere in support of the public unions, and businesses that want solicitation have all catered to workers in one way or another. Even emails from liberal-progressive groups I get daily are taking a very different turn, coming out

strongly for workers and looking for ways to empower the unions. WORT, the community station, has been covering the bill and the protests around the clock, airing testimonies of workers and most all of their music is labor or struggle themed.

Lastly, things are getting more militant day by day. Monday was sleepier, Tuesday was people finding each other and feeling it out, bolstered by students and firefighters, Wednesday more support (now from cops, too!) and experimentation and today chants are turning to calls for Walker's removal, direct action and no compromises ("Kill the bill!"). Since legislators have fled the state and broken quorum, there is a little more wiggle room to plan something and we're hoping to build confidence to keep things going and encourage strikes or other job actions if the bill makes it through—my sense is that workers are livid and they want this thing dead, period. Wednesday night there was an exchange outside the finance committee where someone came out to silence the chanting, "Be quiet so we can amend this thing for you," which was countered with, "We don't want an amendment, kill the bill!"

So that's the gist of it. Who knows if we've hit the peak or if tonight's sleep-in will have more networking among unionists, students and other workers that will lead to more militancy.

P.S.

* From Solidarity. Andrew's blog: <http://www.solidarity-us.org/current/blog/286>

Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF: [Wisconsin, USA - Grass Roots: Labor activists strategize for 'class war' ignited by Walker budget bill](#)