

More on Madison

(Editor's Note: the following letter synthesizes two e-mails from a comrade, AS, about some disagreements with Loren Goldner's article on Madison in IN No. 3).

I don't think I was criticizing what you wrote that sharply. I do remember mentioning that one of the first groups out there was the Latino "Immigrant Workers Union" which is a coalition to draw attention to things that affect Latinos in the Madison. In Milwaukee the mood was much different than in Madison. From what I heard from the Milwaukee people, I know the feeling there was much more hopeless generally than in Madison; 'hopeless' was the word I heard them use repeatedly. The crisis hit Milwaukee workers really hard. Workers in Madison exist largely in the state and the insurance business and have sources of state-capitalist investment that are more steady than Milwaukee, which needs heavy industry. For me, growing up as a worker in Madison, I could bounce around working at small workshops around the city and never once get my foot in the door at a bigger, better-paid blue collar workplace. For all Milwaukee workers, the deindustrialization has been brutal. Workers at Harley-Davidson in Milwaukee were forced to accept a 50% cut in starting pay just to keep the company from leaving the state. Milwaukee has been a laboratory of this austerity and public education demolition for decades now. The feeling I got from the Milwaukee people was one of despair.

Strange thing is that there is almost no contact with leftists in Milwaukee and Madison at all, even among white leftists, It is as if Milwaukee is on the other side of the continent and not an hour and half away by bus. There were a few contingents that did come from Milwaukee to the protests in Madison, and a few protests in Milwaukee itself, but even there African-Americans were less present than Latinos who were much more active. Your criticisms aren't much different from mine on the whole. There were contingents of people from the various "First Nations" bands who came to Madison as well. The City of Milwaukee maybe has 500,000 people, maybe a third of them are African-American, I don't know. It is reaching a point where the Latinos will be equaling them in numbers. The ethnic makeup of people here is heavily German, Scandinavians live further north mostly.

The most positive thing in the protests was the open microphone in the capitol rotunda in Madison where there was an open forum that the DP folks couldn't control. For a lot of workers this was the first time they ever got to speak in front of other workers and listen to other workers speaking publicly. The most active left group by far was the IWW and they have benefited from this. Their General Strike poster was the most popular poster. Still their activity raises questions in my mind of the nature of the left, even the IWW, in tailing initiatives that are run by the DP/Union nexus of bourgeois power. Even when they have the numbers to undertake their own initiatives, they still tail the "progs". There was no attempt to raise awareness of state tax increases on the poorest workers, or to link the austerity measures to the constant austerity and repression faced by racial minorities. The Latino presence at the protests also raises questions because they seem obligated, or constrained, as immigrants, to show their patriotism by carrying US flags around to all the protests.

Due to a stretch of unemployment, I took a half-time job late last summer working at the office of AFSCME Local 2412. So, I became the office manager for a union local. In an office of one, I "manage" myself. I saw the whole thing unfold from the defeat of the last contract, to the Walker austerity bill. I was present at the union local meeting where we heard from the higher ups in AFSCME Council 24 that there would be no strike, which was decided and declared from the start. I even sent out the rally notices to the state workers on campus. Now AFSCME Local 2412, and my office neighbors, Local 171, represent respectively the clerical and blue collar sectors of the UW Madison campus. 2412 is the big union on campus and was right at the center of much of these protests. I was fielding calls from the press trying to get information out of me.

This all was strange for me. I had once been a member of Local 171. I had helped animate the Group Internationaliste Ouvrier in Montreal, I helped create Internationalist Notes. I took up left communism after being repeatedly called an ultra-leftist by mainline lefties back in the eighties. Needless to say I'm not that keen on the DP, or the unions. At the same time I feel obligated to participate and be present, which is doubly difficult without funds or propaganda to distribute. A struggle takes on a different tone altogether when it is your friends and family that are there protesting the wage cuts and austerity measures.

I saw the left groups descend on Madison, sell a few papers and then leave. I believe that in what I said to RS, I might have been directing some of this at your article. It is a shame I couldn't have shown you around a bit, as I do know this area very well. I did make an attempt to contact the ICC but I was too late and the militant they sent came, sold a few papers and then left. I was busy working and sending out the bulletins for the protests and wasn't doing a lot of propaganda distribution, so it was to them as if I was never even there, at least from what they said. They subsequently denounced the whole thing as a DP/Union maneuver. In ideological content we had the same dominant reformist thinking as in the protests of the "indignados" in Spain today, we even had something of a workers assembly going on in the capitol for a time. Yet they denounced the protests here and praised the protests there. The real question wasn't the ideological content of these protests but their own participation which brings their praise, or condemnation when they do not participate. The left reformism and DP dominance doesn't change the fact that there were 150,000 workers in the streets and every scrap of poster board in the county had been turned into picket signs such that all the stores in the county ran out of poster board. It was an extraordinary thing to see.

It seemed to me as though east coast militants only noticed when the protests were almost done, and my own efforts at creating small groups of revolutionaries around the mid-west and the south has been a failure by and large but I think what took place here confirms what I've tried to tell militants that workers in the mid-west and the south are important and that there won't be a class struggle in the US without them. It is disheartening when a massive protest of workers comes along the revolutionaries weren't present even in small numbers and the usual cast of left-ish characters took over playing their role as adjunct to the left arm of the ruling class and its Democratic Party. The "left" in Madison consists of

the IWW, the ISO and "Socialist Action" (pro-Castro-ex-trots, Minnesota and Wisconsin based largely). Many of the shop stewards and leaders in AFSCME are supporters of "Labor Notes" as well as being loyal Democrats.

Yes, the electoral stuff is what has taken over. The protests were called off. Some activity has remained sporadically across the state in smaller towns and cities. There were demonstrations in Mount Horeb, a town of 7,000 people had a workers demonstration which drew over a thousand at the peak of the demonstrations; this was happening all over. Now all energies are put into these recalls. People believe it will achieve some sort of victory or stability in the face of the fact that more recalls are being attempted at one time than have ever occurred before. As strikes were ruled out by the unions from the start, and the teacher/student sickout/walkout was called off two days into it, it is seen that a strike is impossible by most people. One justification I heard was that since people are no more than 16 lost work hours away from losing everything they have, to talk about a strike is "irresponsible". I have argued against this the most successful wave of strikes in US history occurred at the end of WWII and usually lasted for less than five days on average during a time when workers were considerably poorer. I have also argued that the strike tactics that are illegal, sympathy strikes etc., are illegal because they work. The recall effort is feverish. I believe that the workers will be disappointed by the results given the past history of recall elections. The electoral stuff really bled the energy out of the movement.

The whole "Wisconsin's progressive tradition" propaganda is quite strong and lends unwarranted credibility to DP's bourgeois power structure. They seem to have forgotten that the last governor, Jim Doyle the Democrat, was the one who gave state workers a rolling layoff amounting to almost three work weeks a year amounting to a sizable cut. Basically the Democrats gave them a pay cut without formally cutting anyone's hourly pay or benefits. For the bourgeoisie this was a clever maneuver but not brutal enough for the other faction of bourgeois politicians. There was absolutely no attention given by the unions to the layoffs that public sector workers will be facing, almost 22,000 people will lose their jobs and they are told to wait until the recall elections. There was no protest over the gutting of tax credits to the poorest workers in the state in both the public and private sectors either.

The university system is now messing with payroll data so that the unions don't even know who is paying dues or who is even in the workforce now. It was two members of the Democratic Party who shot down the last contract in the state senate and assembly. They just refused to show up for the vote on the new contract that the state workers unions had negotiated knowing full well that the GOP was going to take over in the next session and be out for blood, so the Democratic Party basically allowed this situation to happen. When the state workers' union boss, Marty Beil, called the two DP state congressmen "whores", it was evident that the bosses has just stopped playing ball and no longer considered the unions as necessary for assistance in implementing the austerity measures. I've never heard a union leader speak that bluntly about a failed contract, ever, so even last November it was clear that something was going to go down this spring. The union leaderships were not ready for politicians who weren't interested in playing by the

established rules of the game.

AS