

Obama's cynical posturing on Wisconsin protests

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President Obama gave an interview to a Milwaukee television station Wednesday, trying to posture as a supporter of Wisconsin public workers, as mass working-class protests develop against cuts demanded by Wisconsin's Republican Governor Scott Walker.

The content of his remarks—to say nothing of the record of his administration—showed that Obama agrees with Walker's goals, however, and merely quibbles with his provocative tactics and rhetoric.

Obama spoke with a WTMJ television reporter for ten minutes, an interview set up hastily as the scale of the confrontation in Wisconsin began to become apparent.

The first question was about his reaction to Walker's actions in pushing through legislation to eliminate collective bargaining rights for most public employees.

"Everybody's got to make some adjustments to new fiscal realities," he began, endorsing the basic falsification employed by Democratic and Republican politicians alike to justify cuts in public employee wages and benefits.

None of these big-business politicians suggests that the wealthy "make some adjustments." On the contrary, Obama and Congress pushed through a further extension of tax cuts for the rich less than two months ago. This is on top of the trillions of dollars that US authorities have handed to Wall Street during the Obama administration.

Obama also endorsed the hollow claim that wage cuts are necessary to "save jobs," echoing the pretext used by Walker that his cuts were critical to "avoiding layoffs." The president added that he himself had imposed a two-year wage freeze on federal government workers, using the same justification, that it would avert layoffs.

He then continued, "Some of what I've heard coming

out of Wisconsin, where you're just making it harder for public employees to collectively bargain, generally seems like more of an assault on unions." It was wrong to "vilify" these workers, he said, "or to suggest that somehow all these budget problems are due to public employees."

The vague and tepid language is typical of a man who pretends to find middle ground in escalating class conflict. Most significant, however, is the subject Obama avoided: when asked about Walker's threat to call out the National Guard, he said nothing about it. Nor did he criticize the governor for preparing to use troops to suppress political opposition from the working class.

Obama is opposed to only one aspect of Walker's policy in Wisconsin: his refusal to enlist the AFL-CIO and teacher union officials to enforce wage and benefit cuts on public employees, as Democratic governors have done in state after state. In other words, he supports the aims of Walker's policy—the destruction of living standards and democratic rights for working people—but he proposes an alternative method.

This fact is underscored by the comments of Obama's secretary of education, Arne Duncan, at a two-day conference in Denver, Colorado that took place as the crisis in Wisconsin exploded. Duncan has been the point man for the Obama administration's assault on public school teachers—using the "Race to the Top" funding to incite state governments to outdo each other in taking measures that disregard seniority, gut working conditions, and slash wages and benefits, in the name of improving "failing schools."

Duncan told a gathering of union and school officials from more than 150 school systems, "My view is that we need to take a hard look at the impact of staffing rules, seniority and equity issues." He hailed a series of

examples of union-management collaboration to victimize teachers as alleged “poor performers,” and to disregard seniority in hiring, assignment and promotion.

It was Duncan—with Obama’s support—who last year endorsed the mass firing of teachers in Central Falls, Rhode Island, after they voted down demands from the local school board to tear up their local contract and impose drastic changes in work rules, including elimination of seniority.

At the same time, when the issue of Wisconsin came up on Wednesday, Duncan said that efforts to eliminate collective bargaining and union recognition worried him. Like Obama, Duncan recognizes that the teacher and public employee unions are not obstacles to the destruction of jobs, benefits and working conditions, but auxiliary instruments for carrying out these attacks on the working class.



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