

# Illinois AFSCME sets strike authorization vote

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Last week, the Illinois American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Council 31, representing 38,000 state employees, scheduled a strike authorization vote to begin on January 30 and end mid-February. The strike authorization vote is in response to Republican Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner refusing AFSCME's latest contract proposal.

The current labor contract expired on June 30, 2015, with Rauner refusing to negotiate with AFSCME since January 2016. Last November, the governor began unilaterally implementing his draconian contract, which included a four-year wage freeze and a doubling of health insurance premiums, after the Illinois Labor Relations Board (ILRB) declared negotiations between the state and the union had reached an impasse.

However, last December, an Illinois circuit court judge agreed to a request by AFSCME to place a temporary restraining order on the implementation of Rauner's new contract agreement, temporarily halting it. AFSCME cited a legal loophole that declared the contract to be invalid because Rauner implemented it without the ILRB formally publishing their conclusion in written form.

AFSCME is using the temporary ruling to buy time in order to bring Rauner back to the negotiation table. The union's bureaucratic leaders are desperate to convince Rauner they are willing to do his dirty work. AFSCME's latest contract proposal aimed to do just that.

Prostrating themselves before Rauner, AFSCME offered to accept a four-year wage freeze, as demanded by him, and increase the out-of-pocket costs for health insurance.

Making sure Rauner got the picture, AFSCME declared the following: "Making clear that this framework did not represent the union's 'last, best and

final offer' on these issues, [Roberta] Lynch [executive director for AFSCME Council 31] stressed that the union stands ready to negotiate further on all other outstanding issues."

In other words, AFSCME is ready and willing to make more cuts if it pleases Rauner.

However, Rauner dismissed the offer, contending the ILRB ruling of an impasse between the state and AFSCME still stands. He is seeking to wait it out until the temporary restraining order is lifted.

Dennis Murashko, a lawyer in Rauner's administration, stated, "It is disappointing that AFSCME refuses to respect the state labor board's bipartisan ruling and work with us to implement a contract that is fair to taxpayers and state employees alike."

AFSCME's decision to call a strike vote in response to Rauner's refusal to continue negotiations is mere posturing to convince the rank-and-file that the union is working on their behalf.

The strike authorization by no means implies a strike will take place. In fact, not a single strike has been called in the entire history of AFSCME Council 31. If, however, a strike is called, workers will be without pay for the duration of it as AFSCME does not have a strike fund. The union leadership is fully aware of this and hopes, if a strike is called, it will quickly be called off by financially choking its rank and file.

However, the Rauner administration stated that a strike would be illegal given the agreement between AFSCME and the state, which has a "no strike, no lockout" clause. The union may strike if an impasse has been reached, but is denying that it has.

In an email to AFSCME state workers, John Terranova, Deputy Director of Labor Relations for the Rauner Administration, threateningly wrote, "Even if a

strike by AFSCME is determined to be legal, employees may be replaced. Unless an unfair labor practice caused the strike, striking employees may not automatically have the right to have their job back at the end of the strike. They would only have the right to vacancies IF they were qualified and IF one exists.”

The Rauner administration is worried about the possible consequences of a strike and the possibility of a “Wisconsin moment,” when tens of thousands poured into Madison, Wisconsin in 2011 to protest Governor Scott Walker’s attack on collective bargaining.

Just as concerned is AFSCME. Working on behalf of the Democratic Party, the union has systematically isolated the struggles of the 38,000 state workers, waiting until the very last minute to seek strike authorization, which may very well amount to nothing.

For workers, if a struggle is to be waged, then they must abandon the corrupt organization and build new organizations of struggle, rank-and-file committees that are independent of the unions and all capitalist parties, including the Democratic Party.

The AFSCME leadership enjoys lofty privileges at the expense of workers and they do not want to lose them.

According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2014, the average Illinois state worker made approximately \$60,000. According to reports filed with the US Department of Labor, in 2013, Lynch, AFSCME 31’s current executive director, made \$130,504 when she was the acting deputy director. In 2013, Lee Sanders, the international president of AFSCME, made \$350,058.



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