

RAPPORTO DALLA MANIFESTAZIONE DI MADISON NEL WISCONSIN (USA)

Vi inoltro questi appunti provvisori e diretti di LOREN GOLDNER sulla mobilitazione nel Wisconsin contro il tentativo repubblicano di far leva attraverso l'austerità per abolire la contrattazione collettiva, una manifestazione di oltre 100.000 persone come non si vedevano dagli anni '60...ma con molti ma. Ci scusiamo per l'invio del testo originale inglese, ma in questi momenti di surriscaldamento degli eventi in tutto il mondo, abbiamo molto da tradurre, e cogliamo l'occasione per rivolgere un caldo invito ai compagni che conoscono l'inglese a collaborare, anche solo traducendo questo testo.

Giovedì, 17 marzo 2011

Caro Dante,

Ti spedo le mie notizie sulla lotta di Madison Wisconsin, dove sono andato il fine de settimana scorso.

Un abbraccio

Loren

The following consists of my very tentative notes about the Wisconsin mobilization against the Republican attempt to push through austerity and abolish collective bargaining.

I welcome comment and critique.

Loren

BRIEF REPORT FROM A BRIEF VISIT TO MADISON

I managed to get to Madison, Wisconsin, for the mass demonstration there on **March 12** in the ongoing mobilization against Governor Scott Walker's assault on public employee unions. I went with a New York comrade and met up there with a comrade from Minnesota and his wife. The following day, I talked for a couple of hours with a highly knowledgeable Madison academic associated with the Working Families Party.

What follows are some brief notes on my impressions and things I learned.

The demo was apparently the largest in this struggle so far: over 100,000 people. The crowd seemed to be overwhelmingly working-class, from all over Wisconsin. There were many families with young children. This has to be the biggest working-class mobilization in the upper Midwest in decades; it was reportedly larger than any of the antiwar demos in Madison during Vietnam. We may recall the P-9 (Hormel) strike in Austin, Minnesota in 1985-1986, or, farther south, the "Three Strikes" in Decatur, Illinois between 1993 and 1996, but the Madison demos have dwarfed them, included in national (and even international) attention. In recent decades, only the national Latino demonstrations in May 2006 can be considered a larger working-class mobilization, but they not related to a specific issue such as the union-busting austerity now underway in Wisconsin. If a lot of University of Wisconsin students had not been on spring break, the March 12 demo in Madison would undoubtedly have been even larger. Union buses had brought people from all over the state, and there were significant numbers from out of state.

The Capitol building, in front of which the rally took place, had been occupied by thousands of people from the middle to end of February, when the last hard-core thousands apparently left, largely voluntarily. The Capitol had also been occupied on March 9 after the Republican state legislature had passed its hastily-drafted law ending collective bargaining for public employees, after separating it from the previous bill which combined abolition with massive budget cuts to circumvent the need for a quorum. That occupation had also ended, apparently voluntarily.

This was the third or fourth demo of this size since the confrontation erupted in mid-February. For someone such as myself who remembers the late 1960's, the mood seemed calm and relaxed by comparison. There were not as many American flags as I recalled seeing in videos of the previous mobilizations, but the crowd did at one point sing "America the Beautiful", something that would have been inconceivable in 1969 or 1970. (One recalls that even the IWW used American flags at its demos to take that symbolism away from the capitalists. If I had carried a flag, it would have been red.) There was also some singing of "Solidarity Forever".

Judging from the signs that an important number of people carried, there was general support for the unions and for the Democratic Party, especially for the "14" from the state senate who had disappeared to Illinois to deprive the senate of the quorum necessary to vote Governor Scott Walker's full bill. (Wisconsin law requires a quorum to pass any law involving expenditures). The "14" had returned and some of them spoke at the rally, their speeches periodically interrupted by chants of "Thank you! Thank you!". (According to one local informant, the "14" were absolutely undistinguished garden-variety Democrats who had been trying to redeem themselves with their trade-union base.) The great majority of signs were unsurprising; anti-Walker, anti-Koch brothers, a few quotes from Hitler about abolishing trade unions in 1933, support for the "14", references to Tahrir Square. A few signs asked Obama plaintively when he was going to support the struggle. No one criticized the union leadership or the "14" for their apparent willingness to give lots of ground on wages and benefits if only Walker would drop the demand for the end of collective bargaining. There were also lots of signs and lots of energy over the recall campaign aimed at some Republican senators who seemed vulnerable, as well as for electing a very ordinary Democratic judge to the state supreme court. The fact that Democratic governors such as Jerry Brown in California or Andrew Cuomo in New York were attacking public unions (though not collective bargaining per se) in much the same way as Scott Walker didn't seem to faze this sentiment. Here and there, very sparsely, were signs calling for a general strike, mainly (as far as I could tell) distributed by a small contingent of the IWW. I could also see few signs of leftist sects such as the ISO, Spartacists, etc.

The speeches were unremarkable, of a generally pep rally tone, interrupted by loud applause and chants. No speech I heard (and I was admittedly paying more attention to the crowd than the speakers) said anything about the capitalist system or the idea that these attacks were merely a continuation of attacks on the American working class going back to the 1970's. No one called for a break with the Democratic Party or criticized the unions in any way, even for accepting all the cutbacks even before negotiating. Judging from the crowd response, such a speech would have struck a sour note in the overall jovial, Kumbaya tone of the demo. (In the opinion of my very knowledgeable local informant, on the other hand, 50% of the crowd was very skeptical about the Democrats and the trade union bureaucrats.)

The crowd also periodically chanted the slogan "This is what democracy looks like" (which as far as I know originated in Seattle) and "The people united will never be defeated", which had an ominous ring to one who remembers that it was the chant of the mass demos in Chile just before the Pinochet coup and a massive defeat of the "people".

One of my main objectives was to find out the reason for the overwhelmingly white majority of the demonstrators, as I had seen it in videos from previous weeks and saw it again in person on March 14. It is true that only 6% of the population of Wisconsin is black, but Milwaukee, with 200,000 black people, is only one hour away. One reason, apparently, which I learned in conversation, was that most blacks in Milwaukee are trapped in almost apartheid conditions in north Milwaukee, where there is barely even any public transportation, a situation exacerbated by Scott Walker himself when he was county executive there. Most blacks in north Milwaukee don't have cars either, which combined with the lack of public transportation makes it difficult for them to even hold down jobs, to the extent jobs are available. Milwaukee rates as one of the most segregated cities in the U.S. The situation results in part from the de-industrialization of Wisconsin going back to the

1970's, which essentially decimated the black working class. Wisconsin also has one of the highest rates of incarceration of blacks and Latinos in the country, on a per capita basis, including in Dane County, where Madison is located.

Latinos, generally a much more recent presence, were equally absent. This was explained to me as a case of a recent immigration working hard and keeping its head down politically.

In one conversation with a retired steel worker from Milwaukee, I asked him his opinion about the absence of blacks and Latinos. His first reaction was to say he hadn't particularly noticed, (revealing in itself); he then talked about all the plant closings that had pushed large numbers of black workers and their children into marginality. One can of course hardly draw conclusions from one conversation, but my guess is that in this largely white state his lack of attention to the absence of minorities would hardly have been untypical of many present. Coming from New York City, on the other hand, it was one of the first things I noticed.

The race/class dynamic also informed one of my other questions, namely about the police support for the movement and the presence within it of prison guards, who are members of AFSCME. The police (and firemen) had both apparently supported Walker in the November 2010 election, but joined the movement over the issue of collective bargaining. Some people to whom I have voiced these concerns have said that they are irrelevant to the movement as it exists today, but I could not imagine such cordial relations between police and prison guards and a similar movement if it erupted in Chicago or New York or Los Angeles. (I also recall that AFSCME in Pennsylvania squelched any union statement about the case of Mumia abu Jamal--on death row for 28 years--and in California stopped a state investigation when some of its members were filmed organizing gladiator fights between prisoners in the supermax.)

My overall feeling, based on essentially one afternoon in the demonstration and a few conversations with highly informed locals, was that this movement is in its very early phase, and unless it greatly expands its outreach, it will be defeated. It is difficult to compare to the movements of the 1960's because it begins with precisely the white working-class population that was largely absent from many (but not all) of the movements of that period. In order to win anything of substance, it must reach out to blacks and Latinos on a class-wide basis, as well as to the casualized working class that resulted from de-industrialization and which is susceptible to right-wing demagoguery about coddled public employees. It has to break with the Democratic Party and the unions by developing new, class-wide forms of struggle. At present, it gives the impression that if Democrats could recapture the state legislature and overturn the Walker bills, it would demobilize.

But given the world crisis, there is no going back. The movement will have to "tell the truth" about the gravity of the crisis, and realize that any victories along the way will be temporary, prior to the overthrow of capitalism.

Nevertheless, it is the largest working-class mobilization in the U.S. in a very long time, and for that reason alone, win or lose, its existence and its groping for direction are the most important things about it.