

# PROTEST LIKE A WISCONSINITE

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(The slogans in quotation marks are from signs held or chants by demonstrators)

This article is a continuation of one that appeared in the last issue of *Polity* (“Protest Like an Egyptian” – In Wisconsin,” January-April 2011). That article detailed the broad-based movement that developed early this year in opposition to the labour policy of Governor Scott Walker and his Republican Party (RP)-controlled state Assembly and Senate. The governor’s ‘budget repair bill’ included measures to restrict collective bargaining to only wage issues (and on wages only up to the cost of living), eliminating such rights regarding pensions and health care benefits. Aimed at the state’s public sector workers, who are unionized, the bill also required workers to vote annually to retain their union as bargaining agent.

The response to these measures saw people take to the street, and the state Capitol building, the numbers rising from 10,000 in mid-February to 125,000 two weeks later (with support demos in every state), and to 150,000 in mid-March. Notable support came from high school and university students, police and firefighters (in unions left out of Walker’s plan), the NBA and NFL players’ unions, Catholic archbishops, and groups working on issues of poverty, civil rights and the environment. By the third week of March, campaigns had been started to force recall elections this summer on key state Senate Republicans, and a county judge had issued a restraining order on putting the collective bargaining bill into effect – the RP Senate had violated state Open Meetings Law regarding proper notification of a committee meeting and vote on the bill. In the process, in Wisconsin and nationally, future strategy was being debated. In addition, old stereotypes of big government/small government, of unions, and of public workers were being broken.

Now, as of late August, the bad news is that, after another example of the crude manipulation of the democratic process, the law came into effect at the end of June. The good news includes DP gains at several recent state elections, and at recall elections (on state senators in both parties). In addition, the events in Wisconsin have affected RP plans concerning the national budget, and there have been public challenges to

similar RP legislation in many states. With the 2012 election season quickly approaching, there is a heightened realization of what is at stake, and an urgent need for coordination by a broad range of groups. One thing is for sure, these are not boring times.

## “People Not Profits”

And they certainly are not easy times, despite media spin regarding a recovering US economy. More than ¼ of US productive capacity remains unutilized. The only sectors that recovered from the Great Recession are corporate profits and the stock market. By March 2011 the former were 22% above pre-recession levels, with workers in that sector making 3% less. By early June the official unemployment rate was again over 9%, some 13.5 million people. This figure does not include the 6.5 million who are not in the labour force (not looking for work), and the 8.4 million who can find only part-time work – a total of 28.4 million. One third of the officially unemployed do not qualify for unemployment benefits. In March the official unemployment rate for blacks was 15.5%, Hispanics 13.7%, 16-19 year olds 25%, and whites 7.9%. Since 2007, 5 million homes have been foreclosed, with another 3 million likely in the next 3-4 years. By the end of 2010, 25% of homeowners were underwater, meaning that they owe more on their mortgage than the house is now worth, and prices continue to fall. It should be noted that in ‘good’ times, the housing industry accounts for over 20% of employment. The holding of wealth in the US says it all: the wealthiest 5% of households hold 63.5% of total wealth, and the bottom 60% hold 4% of wealth, with gaps between whites and minorities increasing.<sup>1</sup>

## Wisconsin – “This Fight Is NOT Over!”

According to Wisconsin state law, 24-hour notice must be given for all public meetings, but no such notice was given for the 9 March session when Republicans passed the collective bargaining provisions in a new bill separated from the budget. The Dane County district attorney filed a challenge, and the county judge agreed, issuing the restraining order (RO). The RP, instead of passing the bill again properly, appealed to the Court of Appeal. This court felt it could not decide the issue, and on 24 March sent the case up to the state Supreme Court (SC, having a 4-3 conservative majority).

The Court of Appeal raised the following questions: Can a circuit court judge strike down a legislative act as a remedy for the violation of the Open Meetings Law (OML)? If yes, does the court have the authority to stop the secretary of state from publishing the bill before it becomes a law? The court stated that the two sides had cited laws that were at odds with each other. Additional questions concerned whether the OML protected a constitutional right; if not, then the judge couldn't void it based on violation of such right; if yes, must the court act only when the legislative process was complete?

Despite this situation, on the next day the administration published the bill electronically, prompting the county judge to ultimately issue two restraining orders against any attempt to implement the bill. At the end of May, the county judge ruled that a "clear and convincing" violation of the law had occurred. On 6 June the state SC heard arguments, in preparation to deciding whether to take the case or not.

Then, a week later, the SC accepted the case and issued a decision on the same day – meeting the deadline set by the RP. The 4-3 ruling stated that legislative committees are not subject to the OML; a lower court had "usurped the legislative power" – meaning that the legislature-passed OML is enforceable only by the legislature. The dissenting minority opinion was hard-hitting: the majority, for political motives, had misused facts to support a decision that had already been made; this was not a mistaken application of the law. A day later unions filed a lawsuit in federal court on the grounds that the law discriminates between classes of employees (not applicable to police and firefighters). As things stand, the law has come into effect, and in several months union members will have to vote on whether to certify their unions. An immediate consequence saw the state increase the use of prison labour in (former) union jobs, such as landscaping, painting and basic maintenance. One positive aspect emerged, with a fracture in RP unity, one state senator terming what had happened as a classic case of "overreach."<sup>2</sup>

### Wisconsin – "Vote, Vote, Vote!"

On 5 April elections were held for one position on the State Supreme Court and many in local bodies. The turnout was an unprecedented 1.5 million. In the race for Milwaukee County executive (formerly held by Governor Walker), the RP candidate lost to a Democratic newcomer by 61-39%. The RP also lost in conservative Outagamie County, home of Joseph McCarthy and of the incumbent Republican just re-elected to the Supreme Court, David Prosser.

Prosser ran against Assistant Attorney General JoAnne Kloppenberg (DP). When the results were first announced, Kloppenberg had won by 200 votes. On 7 April, however, the city clerk of Waukesha County announced that she had forgotten to include the votes from one city, and that she had known of this for over a day. Clerk Kathy Nickolaus had previously been on Prosser's staff when he was in the Assembly. She had stored the election data on the computer in her office, not on the city network. Out of over 14,000 'new' votes, over 7,300 went to Prosser, ensuring his win. On 16 April the Tea Party, with Sarah Palin attending, held a rally to celebrate; about 600 turned out; they were met by 5,000 pro-labor demonstrators, shouting "Shame, shame, shame," and "Scott – Pull a Palin – Quit."

Kloppenberg filed for a statewide recount, which was completed at the end of May and confirmed Prosser's win. That process illuminated serious problems regarding the safety of the vote, when ballot bags in Waukesha County were found open, torn, with holes, with seals torn apart and numbers written over. Calls for a federal investigation of the county were unsuccessful. Conservatives retained control of the court. At the end of June it emerged that Prosser had physically attacked a woman SC judge during an argument in her office concerning the collective bargaining ruling. Apparently, he had grabbed her neck with both hands. On another occasion he called another woman SC justice a bitch and threatened to destroy her.<sup>3</sup>

On 3 May elections were held for three Assembly seats of Republicans who had joined the Walker administration. The RP won two, but it was the loss of John Lautz in the third that caught national attention. The 94<sup>th</sup> district had been held for 16 years by Mike Huebsch, who became Walker's secretary of administration in January. Despite the RP spending \$125,000 on negative TV and radio ads, and 8 mailings, DP opponent Steve Doyle won by 56-46%. The 94<sup>th</sup> Assembly district is part of RP state Senator Dan Kapanke's area, and he faced a recall election in August (see below). The RP now holds a 59-38 lead in the Assembly.<sup>4</sup>

Under Wisconsin law, an elected official can face a recall election if enough valid voter signatures are gathered – at least 25% of the total number of votes cast in the election the official won. In the entire history of the state there have been four recall elections. After the state Senate passed the labour legislation in March, efforts began to win the body back to the DP. With the Republicans having a 19-14 Senate edge, a flip of three would give the DP a 17-16 edge. By the end of May the state Government Accountability Board

(GAB) had certified recall elections on six Republicans, and in mid-June did so on three Democrats; this means that 27% of the 33 senators faced a special election.

This recall process exposed two major areas of shady electoral practice. The first concerns the gathering of signatures by the RP, which used several out-of-state groups. One was the American Patriot Recall Coalition, the head of which had served time in jail for grand theft, forgery and writing bad checks. Another was Kennedy Enterprises, which the RP paid \$100,000. As the weeks went by, the DP alleged fraud and filed a complaint to the GAB: some signature gatherers offered shots of alcohol for a signature; some claimed the petition was in support of the DP, in support of schools, for tribal rights, for work on a local park, to recall an RP senator, and even to recall Governor Walker. There were claims that signatures had been forged, that there were names with fake addresses. In the end, the GAB certified the recall efforts against the three DP senators, saying that there were more than enough signatures anyway.

The second practice concerns the successful RP attempt to delay the elections on its six senators, so that it had more time to pass legislation. If there were only one candidate from each party, the RP senators would have faced elections on 12 July. However, if more than one party member wanted to contest a seat, a primary would be held on that day, with the final election on 9 August. (It should be noted that in 1904, Wisconsin was the first state to introduce the primary system – doing away with candidate selection by party bosses; 19 states now use this system.) The RP found candidates, so-called “spoiler” candidates, to force DP primary elections in all six races (and increased campaign costs). One such spoiler candidate was a RP county leader. Here the RP seemed to be on shaky grounds, as under Wisconsin law a candidate must specify his party affiliation. The question arises, is party membership required? At any rate, under state law, a false declaration on this is a Class I felony. The DP decided not to use the spoiler tactic.<sup>5</sup>

Here’s what happened in the summer recall elections<sup>6</sup>:

12 July – primaries in six RP-held Senate seats: All six DP candidates beat the “spoiler” candidates, with five gaining at least 65% of the vote. On the 11<sup>th</sup>, Wisconsin Right to Life ran “robo calls,” urging voters to file absentee ballots instead of going to polling stations the next day.

19 July – primaries in two DP-held Senate seats, and general election in one: The two DP senators won their primaries;

DP Senator Dave Hansen beat RP challenger David VanderLeest (66-31%).

9 August – general election in six RP-held seats: The RP held on to four and lost two. DP Jennifer Shilling unseated Senator Dan Kapanke (55-45%), and DP Jess King beat Senator Randy Hopper (51-49%). The DP lost in suburban Milwaukee against RP Joint Finance Committee co-chair Alberta Darling (54-46%). Another disappointing DP loss was Fred Clark to Education Committee chair Luther Olsen (52-48%). Early in the month, the conservative Americans for Prosperity mailed absentee ballots to voters in two elections; it spent over \$500,000 on TV ads. In a tour of the state, the Tea Party Nation compared anti-Walker protesters to Nazi storm troopers. In mid-July DP supporters started a two-week Wisconsin Truth Tour (by bus), holding open forums. It is estimated that candidates and groups spent \$37 million on the recall elections, split fairly evenly between parties; this was more than double the amount spent on all 116 legislative races in 2010. RP donors included pro-life and anti-gay groups, Ralph Reed’s Faith and Freedom Coalition, and The Club for Growth. The largest DP donor was the labour coalition We Are Wisconsin. While the DP loss of four disappointed many people, others noted that all RP incumbents had long track records and had won in 2008, with most representing districts that had been drawn to elect Republicans.<sup>7</sup> Further, Governor Walker had won these districts in 2010 by an average of 13%, even as Obama took the state by 14%, and most places had never elected a Democrat.<sup>8</sup>

16 August – general election in two DP-held seats: Senator Jim Holperin beat RP/Tea Party Kim Simac by 55-45%. Senator Bob Wirsch beat RP Jonathan Seitz 58-42%.

As things stand in the Wisconsin Senate, the RP has a 17-16 edge. However, in March one Republican voted against the collective bargaining measures; in effect, Walker has lost his majority in the Senate.<sup>9</sup>

Wisconsin – “Hey, Walker, you can’t hide, we can see your corporate side”

Sometimes it’s nice to see elected officials reaping the consequences in the short term, rather than just in the long, or never; it doesn’t seem like Governor Scott Walker will have as easy a time of it as the politician whose path he seeks to follow, Ronald Reagan. Steps are already being taken to force a recall election. Since Walker came into office in January, signature gathering can begin in November, with signatures to be submitted by 3 January 2012 (at least 540,

208 – 25% of the total vote in November 2010). The GAB has one month to determine validity. If there is a recall election, any primary would likely be held on 14 or 21 February, and the election a month later. Already, many cars are displaying “Recall Walker” bumper stickers, and the RP has formed a committee to raise money for Walker’s campaign. That committee sent out a fundraising letter in early May, which referenced an “angry mob,” “union thugs,” “radical left-wing zealots,” and “radical left-wing community organizers.” And there is already speculation, and polls, concerning possible DP opponents; they include Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, who lost in 2010 by 53-46%, former US Senator Russ Feingold, and former US Congressman David Obey. One thing seems certain – Walker is unlikely to try a run for a US Senate seat in 2012. It remains to be seen if the RP will try to legislate changes to the recall law – this would require passage in both houses and affirmation at a public referendum.<sup>10</sup>

In early May one of Walker’s financial backers in the 2010 campaign pleaded guilty to two charges of money laundering. William Gardner, the chief executive of Wisconsin and Southern Railroad Company, had contributed more than the \$10,000 individual legal limit, and had reimbursed company employees for their donations – both charges are felonies. The state had allocated \$14 million to Gardner’s freight rail company to buy the rail track, with the company to operate the trains and be eligible for additional funds. By the end of 2010 the company had agreed to pay a fine of over \$166,000, and the Walker campaign had returned \$50,000. Gardner was sentenced in early July to two years probation.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, the governor is being confronted by demonstrators almost everywhere he goes – he is being ‘dogged.’ In mid-March he went to the town of Washburn (population 2,117) for an RP dinner and was met by 4,000 demonstrators shouting “Shame, shame, shame.” In mid-April he was in Washington, DC, to speak before the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform at a hearing on “State and Municipal Debt: Tough Choices Ahead.” In the face of tough questioning by DP Rep. Dennis Kucinich, Walker admitted that the issue of collective bargaining had not figured in his run for the governorship, and that his measures concerning same would not save the state money. Demonstrators were on hand, telling Walker he couldn’t hide, and “Tax Wall Street, Not Main Street.”

In early May Walker attended the annual opening of the state fishing season, held at Lake Wissota. As he cruised out on

the lake, he was met by dozens of small boats with sign-holding protestors: “Scott Walker Drowning Education in Special Interest,” “Walker’s Mullet: All Shady Business in the Front, Tea Party in the Back,” and “S.S. Union Thug.”

Two days later Walker was again in Washington, to deliver the keynote address at a function of the American Federation for Children (AFC). AFC is run by the Michigan couple Dick and Betsy DeVos; he is heir to the Amway fortune, and she the sister of Blackwater’s Erik Prince. AFC advocates for the privatization of public school education, and plays a huge role nationally in state efforts to implement school voucher, charter school and tax credit school programs, under the rhetoric of “choice” – what this actually means is the use of public funds (taxpayers’ money) for private schooling. It is important to note that in Wisconsin, school choice groups play as big a financial role as business groups in the funding of statewide election campaigns. At the end of June Walker was met by 200 protestors at an event at Devil’s Lake State Park. As 100 guests listened to him speak, people in 12 boats displayed such signs as: “Walker Smells Fishy,” “Walker Jump in the Lake,” “Recall Walker ASAP,” and “Walker Crimes Against Nature.” In early July a flotilla appeared at Walker’s lakeside residence, and in early August he was booed at the opening of the Wisconsin State Fair.<sup>12</sup>

#### Wisconsin – “Say No to Walker’s Budget”

The state of Governor’s Walker’s budget (for 2011-2013) can be imagined: funding cuts regarding schools, mass transit, health care (including cervical cancer screening for the uninsured), and other services. In addition to the \$1.5 billion in cuts (over \$1 billion from public schools and universities), the budget prevents local governments from raising taxes and gives businesses a \$128.7 million tax break. It also expands public school privatization measures (more money to charter schools, few limits on income eligibility for vouchers). Public pressure led the RP to back down on cuts to senior services and recycling programmes, and on initial steps to privatize the University of Wisconsin.

On 4 June protestors started to set up a tent city surrounding the state Capitol – “Walkerville,” modelled on the 1930s Depression-era Hoovervilles. There were information and medic stations, and each day dealt with a different issue theme, with teach-ins and rallies. The city operated until the budget was passed. One sign there read: “Workers Mobilize! Wisconsin: Now Open for the People! General Strike!” The RP held very few public hearings, and in mid-June placed budget consideration in the format of an “extraordinary

session”; this eliminated the required notification of committee hearings and some postponement of actions, and limited debate and amendments. The budget was passed and came into effect on 1 July.<sup>13</sup>

### **Wisconsin – “Voter rights are under attack. What do we do? Stand up, fight back!”**

To chants of “Sieg Heil” and “Shame,” on 19 May the Wisconsin state Senate quickly passed a bill dealing with voter identification, limiting debate to one hour. The measures make it harder for people without photo ID to register, eliminate party-line voting, and increase from 10 to 28 days the state residence requirement for registration. In confirmation that the targets were university students, low-income people and the elderly, Governor Walker started closing Department of Motor Vehicles offices (which issue such IDs) in some DP areas and expanded hours in RP-area ones. Another piece of legislation was passed in July to redistrict the state electorally to assure more safe RP seats; the new plan takes effect in 2012.

Two additional anti-Walker campaigns deserve mention here. The “Stick It to Walker” campaign promotes the boycott of companies whose executives supported Walker, and places such stickers on these companies’ items in stores. Particular targets are Johnsonville Brats and Sargento Cheese; these are family-run companies, the first donating over \$40,000 to Walker, and the second over \$22,000. The Wisconsin AFL-CIO said it would not support the campaign. The second campaign is the Reverse Robin Hoods, led by National Nurses United and Wisconsin Resisters, 200 of whom in early May deposited their ‘last pennies’ in the accounts of the CEOs of J.P. Morgan Chase, M & I Bank and Merrill Lynch at branches in Madison. They stencilled with mud “Tax the Rich.” Later they went to the Senate, chanting and shutting down the proceedings.

A final note on Wisconsin concerns the very fluid electoral situation. The political future of Governor Walker is now in doubt, and he will likely face a recall election. In addition, Wisconsin US Representative Paul Ryan (RP), who chairs the House Budget Committee (see below), must face the voters in November 2012, and he already has a DP opponent, Rob Zerban. In May US Senator Herb Kohl from Wisconsin (DP) announced that he will not seek re-election in 2012. If not for events in the past eight months, one might have expected Ryan to try a run for the US Senate, or even Walker, but the feasibility of both is now in doubt. One RP old hand is mentioned, Tommy Thompson, a former governor (1987-2001) and secretary of the federal Department of Health and Human

Services (2001-2005 under Bush), but he is opposed by the neo-con side of the party.<sup>14</sup>

### **“Save Medicare: Tax the Rich”**

There are many people who would like to see the back of US Rep. Paul Ryan, who has tried to push through the RP budget cut agenda on the national level. Ryan worked for several US senators before being elected to the House in 1998; in 2010 he was re-elected with 68% of the vote, and in 2011 became chairman of the House Budget Committee. In January he gave the RP reply to Obama’s State of the Union address to Congress, and has referred to him as the “class warfare guy.” In his election campaigns before 2010, he received over \$2 million, mostly from finance, insurance and real estate sectors; for the 2010 campaign he received almost \$4 million, 325 times the amount of his DP opponent.

Ryan has attacked the (federal) Social Security (largely retirement) and Medicare (largely seniors’ health care) programmes as “collectivist.” He advocates the partial privatization of the former, and turning Medicare and Medicaid (the latter provides joint fed/state support for low income and disabled) into voucher programmes. He supports cutting income taxes on the wealthy, and the elimination of all taxes on corporate profits, capital gains and dividends. One measure in the 2011 national budget proposed in the House would have the federal government provide subsidies for people to purchase private Medicare insurance, and this would immediately affect all people under age 55. In April the House passed the RP budget, with only four Republicans voting against.

And then, legislators went on their annual April break, back to their state constituencies, with some national polls showing that 80% of people opposed the Medicare plan. Ryan went on a tour of the southeastern part of the state, attending sessions with the public, and encountering big crowds. At Kenosha he was heckled by senior citizens – “Hands Off My Medicare” and “Ryan Stop Lying.” Opponents adopted a tactic used so well by the RP in 2009 against Obama’s health care legislation. At local ‘town hall’ meetings, DP politicians and Obama supporters were confronted by opponents, often organized, even bussed in, by groups such as Americans for Prosperity (AFP). Opponents were prepped on how to crash the meetings.

Now, the tide had turned. All over the country, RP reps were confronted, in Pennsylvania, in Ohio. In April when RP House newcomer Allen West (a star of the Tea Party) visited his Fort Lauderdale, Florida, constituency, handlers had to

prescreen questions and deny access to the microphone, but people shouted. In May 100 opponents showed up at another meeting, and this also turned into a shouting match. Another RP newcomer, Herrera Beutler, was met by her Washington state constituents with cries of “People not Profits.” The national media started to cover these open challenges. Such is the opposition that the AFP may have started to bus in supporters, and the American Action Network (run by several Wall Street investment bankers) issued a sheet of questions to be used by RP supporters.

But the damage had been done. Back from the break, in Washington, DC, some Republicans started to backtrack. Newt Gingrich termed the plan “right-wing social engineering.” RP House Speaker John Boehner said Ryan’s plan was just “one idea,” and the number two RP rep said he was looking for alternatives. With the public on the warpath, DP Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (Nevada) said he would put the House budget to a Senate vote, and at the end of May the budget was voted down 57-40. Five Republicans sided with the majority: Maine’s two senators, Susan Collins and Olympia Snowe, the latter calling the Medicare measures equal to privatization; and senators from Kentucky, Massachusetts and Arkansas.

Republicans have suddenly gone very silent on Medicare, but what happens to the huge federal funds – which workers pay into throughout their working lives to cover retirement, health and disability – will remain a key issue through the 2012 election season. And, finally, another vicious stereotype has been broken, that of a politically conservative and compliant working class; as John Nichols noted, Ryan had claimed that “he could win with these ideas in working-class areas,” but now the RP is not so sure.<sup>15</sup>

#### **“You Say Cut Back, We Say Fight Back!”**

There’s a lot of news coming out of the US, about unions and their campaigns, the situation in individual states, and several upcoming elections. Here are some key highlights.

In an event that may well become an annual affair, 4 April, the day Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, was observed in every state. The We Are One campaign entailed some 1,000 rallies, demonstrations and teach-ins. King was killed in 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, where he was supporting the collective bargaining rights of public workers.

With the RP clearly relentless in its onslaught on social services and collective bargaining, many national unions, and progressive and liberal groups, are scrambling. The AFL-

CIO has signed new support agreements with two sections of the Excluded Workers Congress (domestic and guest workers; after 2006 agreements with day labourers and taxi drivers). The EWC was formed at the 2010 session of the US Social Forum. The union may shift electoral strategy to support candidates who back labour, rather than give blanket support to the DP. The Service Employees International Union has started a campaign to reach low-wage, non-unionized workers, via door-to-door campaigns; it also will give more focus to support of state coalitions. National Nurses United is very active, with Blame Wall Street, and Contract with Main Street campaigns. A significant development is a decision by the International Association of Firefighters to suspend contributions to national-level campaigns, and focus on the states. National People’s Action targets banks and home foreclosures in its Make Wall Street Pay campaign. Various work is being done by Americans United for Change, Moveon.org, and Progressive Democrats for America. Another new development is the formation of the US Uncut group, modelled on its UK counterpart, which targets large banks regarding taxes, and large computer/software companies for sheltering money abroad and not paying taxes; specifically, it is spotlighting Apple for its participation in the industry’s Win America Campaign (with Microsoft, Cisco Systems, Kodak, Google, Oracle and Adobe, which collectively avoid some \$80 billion in taxes).<sup>16</sup>

#### **“We’re Watching. We Vote!”**

The RP agenda is playing out in every state, in one way or another, backed by a party national plan and a national network of funders and supporting organizations. The RP has been building this structure for the past 30-40 years. The fight against this plan during the next few years will have huge consequences, for US citizens and immigrants.

Readers may be interested in the state of Michigan, where Governor Rick Snyder’s Republicans now have the legal right to appoint emergency financial managers to reject, modify and terminate existing contracts and union agreements, and to dissolve local governing bodies of schools and cities. Several towns and some schools in Detroit are under such administration now. A group of citizens has filed a lawsuit, saying that the law is an unconstitutional power grab, and signatures are being gathered to force a referendum to repeal the law. There is also a campaign to recall Snyder.

Or, take Ohio, where in March Governor John Kasich and the RP passed a bill restricting collective bargaining. Under state law, if the required number of signatures are collected, a law can be suspended until voted on by the people at the

next (November) election. In this case, 232,000 valid signatures had to be submitted by the end of June. The organization We Are Ohio, with 10,000 volunteers, ensured that amount by mid-May. By the deadline, almost 1.3 million signatures were submitted, the largest number ever gathered in the state. Another movement to watch is Stand Up For Ohio, a very broad coalition that is holding house parties and public gatherings in many towns and small cities.

Or California, where attempts by DP Governor Jerry Brown to cut the education budget were met by successful protests led by students and teachers. In July the DP held on to a (vacated) US House seat (54-45%).

Or Arizona, where Tucson students fought a school board plan targeting ethnic and Mexican American studies programmes; there is a recall campaign against the president of the state Senate; and the state is the subject of a national tourism/convention boycott due to anti-immigration legislation supported by Governor Jan Brewer.

Or Massachusetts, where DP Governor Deval Patrick had to abandon a plan to target collective bargaining on health care at the municipal level, due to protest by public employees, including police and firefighters.

Or Florida, where the consequences are awaited for RP Governor Rick Scott, one of the most unpopular governors in the country, and his moves to cut taxes and unemployment benefits.

Or New York state, facing budget moves by DP Governor Cuomo and New York City Mayor Bloomberg (independent, RP until 2007). Proposals for state education cuts saw middle school students walk out in Central Islip in April, with some arrested and some suspended; crowds at the police station chanted: "Black, Latino, Asian and white, for public education we will fight!" A broad coalition protested Bloomberg's proposed education cuts in May, with more than 20,000 joining in "The Day We Made Wall Street Stand Still." In May there also was a by-election to a US House seat, in a district held by the RP since the 1970s (the RP incumbent resigned due to dating on the internet). In the outskirts of Buffalo, an area of suburbs, small towns and farms, a white area of higher than average income, DP Kathy Hochul beat RP Jane Corwin by 48-42% – Hochul ran on the issue of protecting Medicare.

Or Maine, where opposition to RP Governor Paul LePage resulted in the loss of a state Senate seat in May. In the

south Portland area, where the party split is usually 50-50, DP Cynthia Dill received 68% of the vote.

And even New Hampshire, with a record turnout in an RP area in May, the DP won a key seat with 58% of the vote.

There is one upcoming US House election, in September to a RP-held seat in Nevada.<sup>17</sup>

### What's Next?

"A government run by billionaires for billionaires is an affront to freedom, morality and humanity," so said Michael Moore in a March speech in Madison, Wisconsin. By now, the reader must have noticed that the relationship between US states and the national level is rather like the one between poorer indebted nations and international donors/financiers. Further, the same squeeze is passed from the state level down to localities. In the 1980s Ronald Reagan's administration expanded the channelling of mandated federal funding to the states. Instead of doing so via each federal programme, states were given lump sums by categories (for example, education, housing, transport, health care) – block grants – which state governments had greater latitude to divide. This often served to set up a scramble to maintain or retain existing services. Today's RP model (with significant DP compliance, and sometimes support) can be seen in much of the US South: low wages and deunionization, with the first priority being to subsidize large corporations.<sup>18</sup> Thus, states compete against each other for outside investment – in a "race to the bottom."<sup>19</sup>

One might ask: How can this work? And the answer, luckily, involves a paradox. On the one hand, there is a consistent, centuries-old message that enforces the following composite brainwashed opinion: there are many problems, but the US system is still the best, it's the only way; at any rate, there are no apparent alternatives; and, after all, the country does have a glorious past. On the other hand, this doesn't work – the message has to be repeated, because too many people have historically not accepted the status quo wealth grab – there are too many holes, too many cracks, too much information, too much poverty.

Michael Moore said (in Wisconsin) that the wealthy are smart, and they've done two things: controlled the message about obtaining the 'American dream,' AND created a 'poison pill' – if US taxpayers don't periodically bail out the financial system (as in 2008), the whole system will crash (including your savings, pensions, etc.).<sup>20</sup>

This obviously leads to questions of strategy: what should be the message, what should be the tactics? Regarding the message, there is a need for providing both an explanation of the existing situation, including reframing the way to speak about it, and a focus on aims. In my previous article a crack in the stereotype of big government was seen, it becoming clear that the RP meaning involved cutting spending on social services, giving tax breaks to the rich, and denying rights.

In a recent article, István Mészáros notes that while services and public sector wages/pensions are fair game, the military, debt and corporate subsidies are not. Further, the Left must speak of, name and educate about the economic system, now a hybrid one, which includes direct investment of public (taxpayers') money into the private sector (state intervention), as in 2008-2010, and in the privatization of education. Another image to fight is the portrayal of globalization as a system marked by increased international competition – actually, each major industry is now characterized by monopoly (a small number of firms which can collectively control prices). Advocating 'growth at all costs' is thus clearly questionable.<sup>21</sup>

Another important point is made by Michael Hurley and Sam Gindin, Canadian union officials: the link between cuts in public services AND privatization must be made clear. In the current conservative agenda, services that are not profitable will be lost; in the services that remain, quality and access will be sacrificed; and people will have to pay more for services and health care.<sup>22</sup> John Nichols is among those who call for incorporating progressive history, as was done in Wisconsin.<sup>23</sup> Many people call for reclaiming the values agenda, stressing equity and fair play. Finally, great care must be taken in speaking about what is being criticized – in particular, government, the public sector, public education, unions – lest such negatives are used to justify the conservative agenda.

With regard to the aspect of aims, Monica Adams references Stokely Carmichael, who distinguished between mobilizing (of people against something) and organizing (people for the same things).<sup>24</sup> Elly Leary, in a review of a book on labour in the 1970s, says that there has been a dominance of "pragmatism" – what is possible is determined by what is present; short-term gain is all that matters.<sup>25</sup>

It is clear that a comprehensive agenda, a plan, a vision, is needed. Here, after noting the twists of electoral politics in

Wisconsin, I will only mention measures that would serve to strengthen electoral participation and open the political space: campaign finance reform (limits on donations, and/or state funding, strict enforcement of existing law); candidate asset disclosure (with harsh penalties for fraud); provisions for the recall of elected officials and for citizens' veto of existing legislation; open primaries for choosing party candidates; and, with regard to underrepresented/minority groups, the inclusion in any such set-asides of people of low income/assets. The electoral system is clearly one where the aims cannot be limited to what is seen as possible in the short term.

As for tactics, it now seems clear that the old models must be questioned, and changed. Groups based on issues must act in coalition with groups that focus on other issues, and with community alliances, burying differences. National organizations need to consider the situation in states, and revise plans as state actions impact the national. Campaigns must be long term, not just revving up at election time. Adherence to issues has to take priority over support for a political party. And there must be less reliance on the media as the key method, and more on direct public contact, and direct action. Finally, organizations must question themselves, their structures, leadership and decision making, to maximize who can participate, how people's skills can be used, and how members and the public can be educated on the issues.<sup>26</sup>

As the US heads into the presidential election campaign season, the trajectory of the building of a progressive movement will be instructive to see. So will the strategy of the DP, which kept its distance from grassroots Wisconsin – even as Obama's approval ratings increased. With the difference between DP and RP support so narrow in many places, what message will be sent? It has been suggested that DP strategists advised party recall candidates to 'tone down' emphasis on labour, perhaps sacrificing votes.<sup>27</sup> And recently, Obama left Wisconsin out of a Midwest tour.<sup>28</sup> As for the RP, there is already anti-RP action in key battleground states, especially Florida and Ohio, and many new (2010) RP governors are now very unpopular. One thing is certain: there will be no lucky upturn in the US economy, the reality is now too stark.

follow the news at: [defendwisconsin.org](http://defendwisconsin.org), [firedoglake.com](http://firedoglake.com), [thenation.com](http://thenation.com), [progressive.org](http://progressive.org), [labornotes.org](http://labornotes.org), [motherjones.com](http://motherjones.com), [inthesetimes.com](http://inthesetimes.com), [zcommunications.org](http://zcommunications.org), [mrzine.monthlyreview.org](http://mrzine.monthlyreview.org).



## Endnotes

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<sup>13</sup> John Nichols, *thenation.com*, 16.5, 6.6.11; David Dayen, "Wisconsin Democrats Will Try to Recall Scott Walker Next Year," *fiiredoglake.com*, 3.6.11.

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<sup>21</sup> István Mészáros, "The Dialectic of Structure and History: An Introduction," *Monthly Review*, vol. 63, no. 1, May 2011, 26-27.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Hurley and Sam Gindin, "The Assault on Public Services: Will Unions Lament the Attacks or Lead a Fightback?" *mrzine.monthlyreview.org*, 15.6.11.

<sup>23</sup> John Nichols, "The Wisconsin Model," *progressive.com*, July 2011.

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<sup>25</sup> Elly Leary, "Labor Revolts in the 1970s," *Monthly Review*, vol. 63, no. 1, May 2011, 42. The book reviewed is: Aaron Brenner, Robert Brenner and Cal Winslow, eds. *Rebel Rank and File: Labor Militancy and the Revolt from Below During the Long Seventies* (New York: Verso, 2010).

<sup>26</sup> In addition to articles by Monica Adams (n 24) and Hurley/Gindin (n 22), see: David Moberg, "Unions Work to Turn the Tide," *inthesetimes.com*, 15.6.11; John Nichols "The Post-Wisconsin Game Plan," *thenation.com* 11.5.11.

<sup>27</sup> Kevin Donohoe, "In Wisconsin, Did Democratic Strategists Tell Candidates to 'Soften' Their Pro-Labor Message?" *thenation.com*, 12.8.11.

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