
“PROTEST LIKE AN EGYPTIAN” – IN WISCONSIN

Judy Waters Pasqualge

(the slogans in quotation marks are from signs held by demonstrators)

As events in Tunisia and Egypt unfolded early this year, there must have been many people around the world who hoped for such things to happen in their own countries, myself included. On 3 March here in Sri Lanka, *The Island* printed an article on the editorial page by an Indian ecologist; he wrote: “And the Americans need Tahrir Square more than anyone else to liberate their country from the forces of tyranny and wars ...”¹ He couldn’t have been more correct. Unfortunately, he, and much of the Sri Lankan press, avoided (and continue to avoid) coverage of a movement that had started in Madison, Wisconsin, a whole month earlier.

While I am used to, and thus not surprised at, seeing instances where more than 100,000 people turn out in protest in the US – whether it be over war, civil rights, or women’s rights – the movement starting from Wisconsin may seem startling in its subject matter. That subject concerns labour rights, and in particular issues regarding trade unions and collective bargaining. For sure, victory in this battle will require long and sustained efforts, and it is hard to imagine the actual toppling of the US government. Still, the good news out of Wisconsin concerns the international exposure of conservative policies and strategies; and it concerns the development of a national campaign that, for example, saw support rallies in all 50 states on 26 February (with 125,000 people in Wisconsin’s capital, Madison), and one that has referenced events in the Middle East, and in turn has picked up a lot of international support. Photos of a poster held by one man in Egypt were prominently displayed by protesters who sat in at Madison’s Capitol building – “Egypt Supports Wisconsin Workers: One World, One Pain.”²

The state of Wisconsin, situated between Minnesota and Lake Michigan and directly north of Illinois, has historically been a progressive and pro-labour state. The precursor of the huge, national American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) was founded there in 1932, and the teachers’ union WEAC (Wisconsin Education Association Council) is one of the most effective nationally.³ In the

midterm elections in November 2010, Wisconsin Democrats lost their majorities in the state Assembly and Senate, with the Senate majority leader and caucus leader, and the Assembly speaker, losing their seats. Republican Scott Walker beat Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett by 5.7% to become governor. Wisconsin joined 20 other states where Republicans hold all three institutions. With Republicans taking office in early January, unions started to contact their members, including the 175,000 state public-sector employees.⁴

“The Mubarak of the Midwest”

Governor Scott Walker (1967-) was formerly the executive of Milwaukee County (2002-2010), where he instituted the first mass-scale private school voucher experiment in the US.⁵ Before that he was in the state Assembly (1993-2002), and worked for the American Red Cross in marketing and fundraising (1990-1994). He is an evangelical Christian, against choice and for welfare reform.

During the election campaign he made no mention of collective bargaining, and promised bipartisanship and job creation. His campaign’s second largest donation was given by Koch Industries (\$43,000), an oil and gas conglomerate run by two brothers who support groups such as the Cato Institute, Americans for Prosperity, the Competitive Enterprise Institute, and the Tea Party. They also donated \$5 million to the Republican Governors Association, which in turn gave \$65,000 to the Walker campaign and \$3.4 million for a campaign against his opponent.⁶ As events unfolded in February, a blogger in Buffalo called Governor Walker, pretending to be one of the Koch brothers. During the 20-minute, recorded call, the governor joked that Koch had a vested interest in his proposals regarding labour, said that he might use financial and legal threats against Democratic opponents and layoff state employees, said that he might be another Ronald Reagan, and that he and advisors had thought of planting troublemakers in the crowd of demonstrators. He admitted to the latter on Fox TV on 24 February.⁷ The governor’s reputation has been seen on signs held by demonstrators that reference “Hosni Walker,” “Remove Walker” (in Arabic), “We Want Governors Not Dictators.”⁸

“United We Bargain, Divided We Beg”

With the state of Wisconsin running a budget deficit of some \$165 million in the two-year period 2009-2011, and with a deficit of perhaps \$3 billion projected for the next period, Governor Walker announced his ‘budget repair bill’ proposals on 11 February.⁹ The budget problems in Wisconsin should be viewed in terms of both the state context and national trends. First, by law, most states and municipalities must balance their budgets; this means that they cannot borrow money to cover operating budgets, but may do so to cover long-term investments, such as infrastructure. During this current Great Recession that started in 2007, many states saw a decline in their tax receipts (due to decreased personal incomes and property values), and an increase in the demand for social services, including unemployment, food and heating assistance. Between 2007 and 2009, state revenues fell by 13%. During the period 2009 to 2011, for all states, the average annual budget gap was \$140 billion (21% of total state commitments). In early 2009, soon after President Obama came into office, the US Congress passed legislation to cover about 1/3 of the deficit in state funds; these provisions run out in 2011.¹⁰

Second, several statistics on US labour are instructive. The US unemployment rate officially stands at around 9%, but is actually over 16% (some say over 20%). As a sector, state and local governments are the largest national employer. Counted among these workers are public school teachers, health care and sanitation workers, police and firefighters.¹¹ About 36.2% of public employees are unionized, and 6.9% in the private sector.¹² It is, thus, not surprising that public-sector workers and their unions are a high target on the conservative agenda. Budgets aside, public-sector unions historically tend to support public-sector spending, and the Democratic Party.¹³ With the Republican election gains in 2010, what happens in Wisconsin became crucial.

Third, a key tactic in the national conservative assault on public-sector unions is the campaign to promote the myth that public employees are better off than private-sector workers – that they are overpaid, with too many benefits. This is often done by simply comparing wages and benefits in the two sectors. This approach, however, ignores the fact that public-sector workers tend to be older and better educated, and to hold more professional and managerial jobs; in reality they earn about 4% less than those in the private sector.¹⁴

Fourth, with regard to Wisconsin, while the state faces a budget deficit, the previous Democratic governor faced a \$6 billion deficit. In addition, soon after coming into power, Governor Walker obtained \$140 million in tax breaks for multinational corporations doing business in the state. He also turned down federal money available for transportation and for the extension of broadband into rural communities. His partisanship for out-of-state corporations, road-building interests that oppose high-speed railways, and certain telecommunications companies became clear.¹⁵

In this larger context, the governor’s proposals for public-sector workers can only be seen as political, and as reflective of the national conservative agenda. The budget repair bill would allow such workers to bargain only on wages (not on benefits such as health care and pensions), and on wages only up to the rate of inflation; only police and firefighters would be exempt. The bill would also require unionized workers to vote each year to retain union representation, with a 51% vote required. Lastly, workers would have to contribute 5.8% of wages to their pension plans (up from 0.2%) and 12.6% of wages for health care (up from 5.6%). Other provisions in the budget repair bill would enable the governor/legislature to sell public property in no-hold deals and to restructure health insurance.¹⁶

“Who’s Disgusting? Union Busting”

After presenting these proposals on 11 February, Governor Walker refused any discussion with Democrats or unions, and it was clear that the intention was to pass the bill in both houses very quickly.¹⁷ With the Assembly having 60 Republicans to the Democrats 38 (plus one Independent), and the Senate with a 19-14 Republican advantage, the odds did not seem good. The catch was a Senate requirement that 20 members have to be present for votes involving expenditures.

In early February news of the proposals started to become public, and on the 11th the Governor threatened to call out the state National Guard (NG) if there was any trouble during demonstrations (which had not yet started). It should be noted that the last time the state’s NG was called out was in 1866. One former NG member responded that the Governor did not understand that the NG “is not his own personal intimidation force to be mobilized to quash political dissent.” The Associated Press picked up the governor’s remark, and the story in Wisconsin went national.¹⁸

With the assembly's finance committee set to start hearings on the bill on Tuesday, 15 February, with a possible vote on the 17th, that week saw an escalation of events. On Monday 800 students from Madison East High School walked out. With others they marched into town shouting "Kill this bill." About 1,000 people went to Walker's suburban Milwaukee home. On the 15th about 10,000 people marched on the state Capitol during the day, with 8,000 attending a night rally. References to Egypt were made from the start; in addition to the above slogans, another was "If Egypt Can Have Democracy, Why Not Wisconsin?"; some people dressed like King Tut. Within days, circulating in the crowd, were copies of a one-page statement of support issued by Kamal Abbas, the general coordinator of Egypt's Center for Trade Unions and Workers Services. On the 15th also, a group of former and current players of Wisconsin's football team, the Green Bay Packers, came out in support. The team is the only fan-owned, nonprofit football team in the US, and had just won the Super Bowl in January. On the same day, the National Football League Players Association came out in support of Wisconsin's state workers. That night, the local education union, Madison Teachers Inc., called on teachers to call in sick the next day and come to the Capitol to lobby. People started to sleep in at the Capitol building.¹⁹

Wednesday the 16th saw some 30,000 people virtually close the downtown Madison area. With schools closed, thousands of high school and university students marched. People came from all over the state, and from Illinois, Minnesota and Kansas. 20,000 teachers attended a night rally. Plans were made for further action, with prominent roles being played by WEAC, the American Federation of Teachers - Wisconsin, and the Teaching Assistant Association at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (TAA).²⁰

The next day, the 14 Democrats in the state Senate announced that they would boycott proceedings, to prevent the required 20-member presence necessary for a vote. The senators left the state to avoid possible steps against them, and went en masse to Illinois. The sleep-in continued. There were rallies every day, with 50,000 showing up on the 18th, along with Jesse Jackson. With the protest of Democrats in the Assembly being echoed from within and outside the building, the Republicans adjourned sessions until the 22nd. The weather was freezing; one sign read, "I Didn't Think Cairo Would Be So Cold."²¹

With Governor Walker claiming that the email he was receiving was largely supportive of the bill, some 80,000 people turned out for a rally on Saturday the 19th. The Tea

Party tried to organize a counterdemonstration, but only several thousand attended. The TAA held teach-ins throughout the weekend. Important support came in a joint statement by the Green Bay Packers defensive captain and team leader.²² By this time, a nearby pizza shop had received phone calls placing pizza orders, using credit cards, for demonstrators in the Capitol – calls from all 50 states, and from more than 50 countries, including Morocco, Haiti, Turkey, Belgium, Uganda, China, New Zealand and even a research station in Antarctica.²³

During the next week, activities continued, with Madison public schools closing for a last, fourth day on the 21st. On Friday the 25th the Assembly passed the bill by 51-17 using a procedural tactic that upped the ante. At 1:00 a.m. the Assembly speaker abruptly stopped the debate and called for an immediate vote without roll call. At the time, 28 Democrats, 2 Republicans and 1 Independent were absent and so did not vote; the bill was passed in 17 seconds.²⁴ Later in the day Governor Walker made a threat that if the Democratic senators did not return he would consider laying off 1,500 workers. Also that day, statements of support came from the executive director of the National Basketball Association Players Association and from Milwaukee Buck team member Keyon Dooling.²⁵

Everyone was waiting for Saturday the 26th. About 125,000 demonstrated in Madison, the largest demonstration in state history, and support rallies were held in all 50 states. A photo collection of the events that day showed protesters with signs that read: "Wisconsinsylvania," "Republicans Against the Bill," "Union Busting is Anti-American," "It's About Real People vs. Really Rich People," "Don't Walker on Me," and "Enjoying Your Weekend? Thank a Union." One man held a sign that said: "Born-Again Fundamental Baptist Pro-Lifer **TURNED** Democrat — Thanks Scott Walker."²⁶ On Sunday police tried to carry out a government order to clear the Capitol building, but about 1,000 people refused to go. From the 28th the governor ordered access to the Capitol be restricted, despite state law requiring it be open to all. Talk began circulating about calling a general strike if the bill was passed.²⁷

During the first week of March the Senate majority leader raised the possibility of expelling the absent Democrats, and on the 3rd the Senate voted 19-0 to hold them in "contempt of the Senate." Other suggestions included reprimands or censuring. The governor ordered law enforcement officials to detain the Democrats and bring them to the Senate (impossible to do since they were not in the state). A judge

ordered the people sleeping in at the Capitol to leave the building during nights; the judge also ruled that the state had violated free speech and assembly rights by restricting access to the building. On the 3rd the Wisconsin Professional Police Association (11,000 members) denounced the measures taken by the Republicans against the Democrats.²⁸ Under the state Constitution, they could only be arrested for a crime, with no civil prosecutions allowed during a legislative session or for 15 days before or after one; the senators had not been charged with a crime; there was no crime.²⁹ On the 4th Governor Walker sent notices to at least 13 unions warning of possible layoffs. Finally, it came to light that the Obama administration was not happy about the Democratic National Committee's active involvement in the events in Wisconsin.³⁰

At the rally on Saturday the 5th, filmmaker Michael Moore walked with local firefighters. In a speech to the crowd, he said that he felt he had to come and thank the demonstrators. The crowd chanted, "Thank you. Thank you." He said that America was not broke; there was a lot of money, but it had been transferred via the 2008 bailout "in the greatest heist in history, from the workers and consumers to the banks and the portfolios of the über-rich." The crowd chanted, "We have had it." "I refuse to live in a country like this," said Moore, "and I'm not leaving."³¹

Early on the 9th Senate Republicans voted to fine the Democrats \$100 for every day they were absent. That evening, in a surprise move, they removed the collective bargaining proposals from the budget bill, thus circumventing the 20-member quorum requirement, and passed the measures by 18-1 (one Republican voted against). At the Capitol the crowd shouted, "You are cowards," and "The whole world is watching."³² Thus, the Senate had acted without having hearings or debate, without following state law regarding open meetings, without notifying Democrats, and done it in less than two hours.³³

The next day, after three hours of debate, and after police had to remove people sitting in front of the Assembly doors, the Assembly passed the new bill by 53-42, with demonstrators yelling, "Shame, shame, shame." Outside, people yelled, "Whose house? Our house," and "Strike." Then, 8,000 people entered the building. That night the state Democratic Party received \$300,000 in donations, raising the total to \$800,000 in five days.³⁴

On Saturday the 12th a rally was held to welcome the 14 Democratic senators back to the state. A record crowd of almost 150,000 showed up, with Jesse Jackson, Susan

Sarandon and Tony Shalhoub also attending. From across the state, farmers came, into Capitol Square riding on tractors, and echoing the slogan of the Wisconsin Farmers Union and the Family Farm Defenders: "Pull together." As Democrats spoke, the crowd shouted, "Thank you. Thank you." They massively yelled: "This is what democracy looks like."³⁵

"Just Say NO to Union Busting!"

In the few weeks since the right to collective bargaining was lost in Wisconsin, developments have truly proved the continued existence of paradox – what was lost by way of shady legislative practice, a seeming defeat, may serve to lead to wins on an even larger scale. Who would have imagined that the enthusiasm generated in January by the win of the Green Bay Packers would be mirrored just weeks later in unprecedented mass actions.

As one writer noted, even talk of a general strike is significant, and there are posters in Madison and Milwaukee calling for one. The need to prepare for such action has been endorsed by the South Central Federation of Labor (97 unions that represent 45,000 workers), with the head of the Madison firefighters saying he would support one.³⁶ People are referencing the great days of labour and unions in the 1930s. Some are pointing to the Days of Action by public employees in Ontario in the mid-1990s. The Communication Workers of America is working on a national "no-business-as-usual day" for 4 April.³⁷

The day after the rally on the 12th, a campaign was solidly launched to recall eight Republican state senators. The collection of a required number of petition signatures would force a new election, which could only be held after 3 November. On the 12th and 13th, 600 people were trained by 25-30 trainers in the specifics of collecting the signatures; in the next few days ¼ of the necessary signatures had been obtained. Four days after the rally state Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald with two other senators attended a fundraising event in Washington, DC, on their own behalf, held by the corporate lobbyist group BRG. As the event was going on in the office on 13th Street NW, some 1,000 people came into the building, shouting "Recall."³⁸

Another action is underway to target the financial backers of Governor Walker. A huge funder was a group of executives at M & I Bank (\$46,308), the largest bank in the state, which has received \$1.7 billion in federal bailout money. With state unions having about \$1 billion in the bank, the "Move Your Money Campaign" is now underway. On 10 March, as several

hundred people gathered at a branch opposite the Capitol, the president and several members of the firefighters union went in and withdrew \$200,000. The crowd chanted: "You got bailed out, we got sold out." Since the Bank of Montreal is in the process of buying M & I, unions have appealed to the Canadian Labour Congress for cooperation. The campaign has picked up support from the Sheet Metal Workers International Association, and United Steelworkers is reviewing its banking portfolio. It should be stressed that, nationally, unions have on deposit more than \$6 trillion in retirement plans, pension funds, stock plans and reserve funds.³⁹

Events coming up that deserve attention include an election for one of the state's Supreme Court justices. Incumbent right winger David Prosser is running against Assistant Attorney General JoAnne Kloppenburg. The primary is on 5 April, with the vote on 3 May. Also at stake on the latter day are three state Assembly seats that were held by Republicans who joined the Walker administration.

The heat is clearly on the Republicans. In the state Senate an attempt was made to discount the votes of Democrats on legislation in the committee stage. The public outcry against this forced Republicans to back down. And, if opinion polls are any indication, fewer than 1/3 of Wisconsinites now support Walker, with more than half of people saying they would replace him if they could.⁴⁰

In a recent turn of events, on 18 March, a Madison county judge issued a restraining order on putting into effect the legislation regarding collective bargaining, set for the 25th. The county district attorney had filed suit claiming the Senate Republicans had violated the 24-hour notice provision regarding public meetings. While the Republicans could pass the law again, they are appealing the court decision.⁴¹

"We Hear You Wisconsin"

Everyone knows now that what is happening in Wisconsin is only one geographic application of the national conservative agenda, and awareness is escalating on the need for national action to fight it. Other states face the introduction of Republican labour legislation seeking to destroy the public-sector unions. In Ohio the state Senate has passed a bill to prohibit collective bargaining on health care benefits and pensions. In Indiana 38 House Democrats have left the state to avoid a vote on a bill. In Idaho the House and Senate have taken collective bargaining away from 12,000 unionized public school teachers; the teachers can no longer bargain on class

size and workload, tenure has been eliminated union contracts have a one-year limit, and seniority is no longer a factor in case of layoffs. In Michigan Republicans are trying to pass legislation that would grant the state emergency authority to break union contracts, and in Iowa the target is bargaining over health care benefits.⁴²

It gets worse. Twenty-two states already have right-to-work laws on the books; this means that a worker can refuse to join an existing union by merely refusing to pay union dues; bills have been introduced in 12 other states. Other efforts seek to prohibit unions from using dues to support election campaigns, and to privatize services. And in a really scary scenario, and with the support of Jeb Bush and Newt Gingrich, moves are on to pass national legislation to allow states to declare bankruptcy. A bankrupt state could void current labour agreements and ignore pension obligations.⁴³

And it gets better. The concept of big government (meaning spending on social services) has been detached as a derogatory label for Democrats. As former US Senator Russ Feingold said of the tactics by Republicans in Wisconsin, this is "big government at its worst. No private employer can do what the governor proposed, nor should it." And an AFSCME member who works at a Wisconsin prison called Republican moves a "Big Government power grab," adding that: "There is no bigger government than the one that takes away an individual's rights and freedoms."⁴⁴

And, most importantly, under scrutiny, nationally, are the history, ideas and strategies of US progressives. Stereotypes of government or government workers as being corrupt, of private vs. public-sector workers, of all unions being corrupt, are being challenged. Issue campaigns that rely only on media and public relations tactics, and not on organizing, are being questioned. The lack of funding by liberal foundations for labour issues is being challenged.⁴⁵ It is time that such side shows are thrown out. The bigger picture is emerging – the need to revive manufacturing, to restore rural communities, to tax on a progressive basis, and to hold banks and speculators accountable.⁴⁶ The issues are economic ones, at stake is poverty, and, finally, these are starting to outweigh issues of specific group identification.

It can be said that the stronger, the more successful, the movement in the US, the better off will be people around the world. The paradox lives on here, too – that movement will, in turn, be stronger for the international support being seen now.

Keep up on the information: labornotes.org, thenation.com, defendwisconsin.org, firedoglake.com, theuptake.org, moveon.org, studentactivism.net, democracynow.org, iww.org.

Endnotes

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Rap star Eminem tells auto workers to never give up in video message

Detroit Free Press

DETROIT—The delegates attending the United Auto Workers’ three-day bargaining convention in Detroit were treated to a rousing, inspirational message Wednesday from rap star Eminem. In a moving, three-minute video, Eminem implored UAW members to never give up.

“You took our country from its infancy into industry,” Eminem said in the video. “Your name still carries with it the idea of a nation built on steel, muscle and sweat.”

The video was filled with images of Detroit’s buildings, factories and houses and was narrated by Eminem.

“You know that nothing is accomplished *without hard work and sacrifice*,” Eminem said. “You’ve built us; you’ve moved us.”

The UAW also replayed the highly acclaimed Chrysler 200 commercial that aired during the Super Bowl. This version of the commercial ended with short appearances from Al Iacobelli, Chrysler’s vice president of employee relations, and UAW Vice President General Holiefield. Afterwards, hundreds of UAW delegates chanted: “One more time, one more time.”

The UAW replayed the commercial.