

The March to Protect Worker Rights and the Middle Class

by Cathy Feingold

Thousands are marching in the streets of Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana. In March 2011, sparked by protestors in Madison, Wisconsin, workers and union members across the United States have rallied in front of statehouses in support of collective bargaining rights for public sector workers. Demonstrators are speaking out against attacks by their Republican governors to eliminate collective bargaining rights and blame public employees and their unions for widespread budget crises.

The protestors are the young, joining the old. Some of them remember Madison as the centre of anti-war protests in the 1960s. For others, this is their first protest. As young activists organise teach-ins and rallies across college campuses and town halls, a new generation redefines its relationship to unions. This new generation recognises that unions provide one of the few ways that regular workers, including public employees, can fight back against the increasingly powerful networks of corporate executives and the politicians who do their bidding.

Unions in the United States face one of the greatest challenges to protecting public sector workers since the 1981 Patco (Professional Air Traffic Controller Organization) strike when President Regan fired striking air traffic controllers and paved the way to allowing replacement workers. Americans understand that what is at stake is not only the wages and benefits of public sector workers but their right to bargain collectively. While Republican governors claim that the budget deficit drives their decisions, their real agenda is to attack collective bargaining rights and weaken unions.

The protestors march across state capitols that are also sites of struggling economic recovery. With US unemployment sticking around 9% and underemployment close to 16%, and with slow job growth in only either low or very high skill sectors, most unemployed workers

find it a real struggle to secure a mid-level position. With the loss of higher paying union manufacturing jobs, many workers look to the public sector for a foothold in the middle class. Yet state budgets are suffering from the negative revenue consequences of high unemployment and falling home prices. The proposed elimination of collective bargaining, by making it even harder for public sector workers to maintain their standard of living (be consumers, buy houses, etc) will only serve to further damage state budgets and harm the overall economy.

Americans understand that the road to economic recovery remains fragile and that continued unemployment and rising oil and food prices continue to threaten a full recovery. However, despite continued economic insecurity, Americans oppose any attempt to use the budget deficit debates as an excuse to strip them of the collective bargaining rights they fought so hard to obtain. In the latest polling by Bloomberg, 64%¹ of Americans - both Democrats and Republicans - support the right to collective bargaining for public sector workers. Sixty-three percent, including 55% of Republicans, say states facing a deficit, and claiming that they cannot pay for all the pension benefits promised to current retirees, should not be allowed to break their commitments. Even after public sector workers have agreed to wage and benefit concessions, Republican governors have continued their targeted assaults on collective bargaining rights.

Why do these attacks continue when most Americans support the right of public employees to collective bargaining? It's simple. The 2010 elections brought in a new group of Republican governors and legislators across the country who are putting forward legislation to eliminate or weaken unions — a key constituency and base of support for Dem-

ocrats. The real goal of Republicans now is to reduce public sector unions (who now represent 36% of the public sector workforce) to the same paltry level as private sector unions, currently representing only 7% of the private workforce. In 2010, 7.6 million of the 14.7 million union members in the US worked in the public sector. By weakening the power of unions, Republican governors weaken the Democratic Party. Of course, this is not just an assault on unions, which have historically been a key support base for the Democratic Party, but on the middle class. In the US, the majority of workers receive minimum social protection from their employers. Defined pension plans have been replaced with privatised savings plans, called 401k plans, and workers pay higher premiums for health care coverage. Corporations, although currently sitting on \$1.8-trillion in profits, claim that to stay competitive they cannot increase wages or provide more benefits. This model only contributes to the growing inequality in the country where the top 5% control 63.5% of the country's wealth.² The US economy is now in a race to the bottom where workers are forced to compete for increasingly poorly paid, insecure jobs with no benefits.

The current debate over collective bargaining and unions relies on the false assumption that public sector workers caused the budget crises and must now pay the consequences by giving up their rights, wages and benefits. While public sector workers and unions are blamed for budget deficits, elected officials will not risk advocating for increasing taxes on the wealthy and on corporations as a sensible alternative to attacks on the middle class and regular workers. Most understand that to do so would jeopardise their access to funding for re-election campaigns.

In addition to Wisconsin, public employee unions now face attacks not only in union stronghold states such as New Jersey and Ohio but also in less-unionised Indiana and Michigan. The proposed anti-collective bargaining and anti-union legislation in these states would greatly reduce the ability of public sector unions to negotiate effectively contracts for workers and organise non-union workers. In Ohio, unions are working to defeat a bill that would limit collective bargaining for govern-

ment workers and eliminate binding arbitration and the right to strike. For the moment, workers in Wisconsin have won their first victory. On March 18th, a judge issued a temporary restraining order blocking the plan by the Wisconsin governor to eliminate collective bargaining. Yet, this win is just the beginning of a longer, drawn out legal battle. These pieces of legislation are not about reducing the budget deficit but rather they were created to further weaken the middle class and the unions that represent them.

In reality, America's budget deficits have not been caused by excessive compensation for teachers, firefighters and other public servants. The country's budgetary woes are more related to the recent economic and financial crises in the housing market. The careless financial practices on Wall Street, not the greed of our kindergarten teachers, brought about the recession and its negative effects on employment and state budgets. The call for the elimination of collective bargaining and economic austerity will not address these root causes and but will only serve to dampen demand in the economy. The use of the current fiscal crisis by politicians to strip workers of their rights and impose severe reductions in wages and benefits will create greater hardship for workers and middle class families struggling to regain their footing.

¹ Bloomberg National Poll, March 4-7, 2011

² Economic Policy Institute, available at: (http://www.epi.org/economic_snapshots/entry/top_5_holds_more_than_half_of_the_country's_wealth/)

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