

The Dynamics of Right Wing Politics in America

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Republican politicians in Washington and the nation's state houses are virtually wilding in the streets. It's as though they are drunk with power, even though the Democrats actually are stronger by virtue of controlling the White House and Senate.

The actions by Wisconsin Republican Gov. Scott Walker to crush the public unions in the name of closing the budget deficit — after first gifting state businesses with tax breaks and programs amounting to \$117 million — are just the leading edge of a broad national assault on worker rights, union rights, women's rights, abortion rights, minority rights, and civil liberties.

The ultra-conservatives enthusiastically attack all government programs that benefit working people, oppose environmental protection, fight against measures to halt climate change, and cater exclusively to the forces that actually guide America's destiny — big money, big business, big finance and big military, all the while whining about big government.

Why are they acting like feudal Crusaders besieging a Muslim fortress? They won the House and account for 29 governorships, but that's hardly a mandate to implement their most extreme proposals — and they know it.

But they also know something else: the Obama Administration, which sets the pace for the Democrats, would always rather compromise than fight. The Wisconsin public unions were encouraged by Democratic supporters to agree to substantial pay and benefit cuts to ward off stiffer punishments, but the Republican Senate voted last night to strip them of most collective bargaining rights, and the Assembly is set to do more damage today.

Having miniaturized their moderate wing and neutered the neoconservatives, the Republican high command evidently believes the time has finally come to overturn some of the social advances gained through the struggles of the Sixties and the Great Depression. They are taking a page out of Naomi Klein's book — "The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism" — by cynically exploiting the economic disaster to implement regressive economic and social policies.

Right wing politicians are now fallaciously claiming that the federal government is "going broke," or "facing bankruptcy" due to the high federal deficit, and therefore "deep cuts are required" in spending programs intended to benefit working people and the poor. This is an old GOP canard, which the New York Times defined March 2 as "obfuscating nonsense."

The sky-high deficit is largely the product of three things: the Bush Administration's huge tax reductions, especially for the rich (\$1 trillion extra to the richest 2% in the last 10 years),

the economic recession (caused by the banks, Wall St. greed and government deregulation) and vast increases in military and national security spending during the last decade.

The unnecessary wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, for instance, are paid for by borrowing money. The amount spent just on these two wars this year alone could easily wipe out all the state budget deficits in America. (We remind our Hudson Valley readers of the March 15 public meeting on the wars and the Middle East uprisings organized by the Activist Newsletter at SUNY New Paltz. See item below, and join us.)

President Bush knew exactly what he was doing by increasing the deficit because President Reagan before him did the same thing: they railed against taxes while boosting spending, the outcome of which inevitably leads to demands to cut programs for the people. One difference between the Reagan era and today is that many Congressional Republicans in the 1980s were not willing to trash the social safety net. This time that's the target, along with the unions.

Now the emboldened conservatives preposterously blame public service workers and their unions for state deficits. For example, private sector workers in Wisconsin earn 4.8% more per hour than comparable public employees.

The real point is that Big Business has been trying to destroy the union movement for well over 100 years, and now their minions in government are trying to finish the job in Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, Iowa, Florida and Tennessee by adopting or planning anti-union legislation.

The GOP governors and members of Congress claim they are "doing what the voters want," but that's nonsense.

The March 1 New York Times/CBS Poll, among others, shows that the public opposes weakening public service union bargaining rights by a margin of 60%-33%. Polls show that majorities favor hiking taxes on the rich to lower the deficit. For instance, in New Jersey, which has a budget-cutting Republican governor, a March 1 Rutgers-Eagleton poll showed that voters supported a tax surcharge on "very high income residents" by 72%-26%.

It has reached the point where Tea Party-backed Sen. Jim DeMint (R-SC) declared that "collective bargaining has no place in representative democracy." This is an attack timed to coincide with high unemployment and the effects of recession upon the relatively weakened American union movement of 15.3 million workers, and scores of millions more non-union workers whose wages are higher because of comparative union standards and organizing efforts.

The right wing is out to win the class war in America. Its every move is intended to deprive the working class and middle class while privileging wealth and power. However, the attack isn't so much because of the Republican Party's strength but of the Democratic Party's political weakness, despite its great power and financing. This is an important factor impelling the conservative politicians to go for broke. It adds to their strength.

Right wing populist Tea Party nationalists, reactionary take-no-prisoners freshmen Republicans in Congress, and ultra-conservative icons such as Palin, Beck and Limbaugh intimidate the old line GOP establishment, which both embraces and fears the upstarts. They and their followers — including the far right and loony fringe — are infuriated by the

presence of a “foreigner” (i.e., African American) and a “socialist” (i.e., Democrat) in the White House — an incentive to keep propelling the Republican Party ever further to the political right.

And sure enough, the Democratic Party — acting the part of a helpless giant — is dutifully trudging 10 steps behind and one small step to the left, just enough to retain the dubious honorific of The Lesser Evil.

This two-party shift toward the right has been taking place for decades, but it’s been accelerating since the Obama Administration made it clear that it would govern from the center-right and compromise with the opposition. The White House conciliated on everything even when it had large majorities in both Congressional chambers. For instance, the Democrats had the power to overturn Bush’s shameful millionaire tax cuts two years earlier during President Obama’s first few “honeymoon” months in office, but he allowed them to expire as intended in two years, then compromised to extend them an additional two years.

The GOP knows it can gain political ground by aggressively attempting to obstruct legislation and fighting dirty. But the right wing’s unstinting combativeness is only partially based on its own limited power. The other part is lodged in awareness of the Democratic Party’s spineless passivity and vacillation combined with a political perspective resembling what was once termed moderate Republicanism, not the liberalism of yesteryear.

Here’s a current example: In the midst of the most assertive right wing assault in modern history, the New York Times reported that President Obama was “road-testing his new message of bipartisan cooperation” in Miami March 4 “with Jeb Bush, the former Republican governor, and then used his first stump speech of the 2012 season to call on Democrats to ‘find common ground’” with the GOP.

At the “risk” of sounding partisan, we must ask: When the center-right searches for common ground with the right-far right, isn’t it likely to be discovered equidistant between the two polarities, that is, clearly closer to the right than the center, much less to the left?

There are, however, two hopeful signs in this bleak political picture.

One is that the Republicans and their Tea Party vanguard are foolishly overreaching. If this continues much longer, public revulsion toward right wing fanaticism probably will punish the conservatives in the 2012 elections. But there’s a downside. The conservative Supreme Court’s Citizens United decision now permits corporations to invest limitless funds in election campaigns, and that kind of money not only talks but it screams, perhaps loudly enough to buy the election for the conservatives despite the shenanigans of the rabid right.

Another sign, the most hopeful of all, is that the Wisconsin public workers and the union movement — supported by tens of millions of Americans throughout the country — are shouting their opposition to those who degrade democracy by attacking working families. They recognize the impending devastation implicit in this assault by corporate wealth being carried out by the politicians.

The big question is will this combative spirit take hold and spread? The more there are mass struggles and strikes for people’s rights — in the workplaces and at the seats of power, in the streets and at public meetings — the more the rights of working Americans will be

upheld and extended.

The best response to this sharp turn to the political right in America is a sharp turn to the left. It's time to unite, get organized behind a determined leadership willing to wage a true struggle, and fight back.

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