

The Fight of Their Lives: All Out War on Workers' Rights in Wisconsin!

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Republicans in Wisconsin, after a fresh set of tax giveaways to corporations and limits on liability in a special session of the legislature this week have decided to go for the whole bratwurst and devour all public sector unions in one big gulp. Fueled by worker distress, Tea Party bluster, and big corporate donors, the governors of New Jersey and Wisconsin are engaged in a kind of tailgating "competitive eating" contest to see which can be the most anti teacher and anti public employee. These governors are feeding at the trough of American angst created by the economic crisis, the bullhorns on Fox News and shout radio. Rollbacks of labor rights and cuts in health care for the poor and elderly are on offer for the red meat crowd that wants someone to pay for their own distress.

The "fat dude," Chris Christie, who fills out a suit like a Usinger's sausage casing, had the early lead in feeding, but had a head start over Wisconsin's Governor, taking power in 2009. Wisconsin's Governor, Scott Walker, the "thin guy," has deceptively Takeru Kobayashi-like competitive eating skills, and has quickly overtaken Christie in feeding at the grill of austerity and union busting. Yet, Walker may have now overreached as workers across the state unite to oppose his proposal with massive rallies in Madison and talk of a state-wide strike.

The bill, which has united unions across the state, would:

- limit collective bargaining to wages which would be capped at the inflation rate
- prohibit employers from collecting union dues
- require yearly votes on certification of all local unions
- require all state employees to pay 12.6 per cent of their health plan and 5.8 per cent of their pension
- deny all University of Wisconsin employees bargaining rights on working conditions and benefits

The budget fix also privatizes state-owned power plants that will leave taxpayers with a long-term bill and allows massive cuts in health care for seniors and the poor by shifting decision making over Medicare from elected representatives to the Governor's office.

This week is a critical week in United States labor history as conservative unions like the

Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) who have traditionally stuck to bread and butter unionism, are now are faced with a threat to their very existence. This week's struggle will test if they are up for the fight of their lives.

Milwaukee, Wisconsin's largest city, was once the world's high tech and high wage leader, as recently as the 1970's. This was enabled by a tradition of clean government, solid infrastructure, trade unionism and a world class educational system otherwise known as Sewer Socialism and the Wisconsin Idea. Oh, how Milwaukee has fallen. Now the city has the dubious distinction of being one of the four poorest large cities in the US. How did we get here? In short, by implementing the policies of Republicans Ronald Reagan and former Governor Tommy Thompson.

Now Scott Walker is reprising the off key tune of his *American Idols*. Instead of the serious industrial policies of US competitors, China and Germany, Reagan and Thompson offered a bubble gum pop chorus of lower taxes, deregulation, free trade, small government and whistling "always look on the bright side of life." As the United States declined Reagan assured us it was "morning in America". Channeling his hero Walker now breezily announces Wisconsin is "open for business," as a substitute for serious economic policies.

Painting by numbers Scott Walker is following the Gipper's first stroke, taking on labor. But Walker's PATCO moment (the busting of the Air Traffic Controller's union) may be an overreach. Walker, the George Babbitt of our times, may find that following Reagan and Thompson's recipe produces different results today. After 30 years of economic decline workers in the United States are recognizing the bankruptcy of these policies and are fighting back.

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