

Workers Rights: How to Win in Wisconsin and Beyond

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The eruption of protests in Madison, Wisconsin against a rabidly anti-union Governor and legislature has become “ground zero” in a fight that, on the surface, appears to be labor unions vs. Republicans.

Digging deeper will reveal a conflict brewing for decades in American society that pits working people in general against an increasingly bold corporate sector. The side that wins the battle in Wisconsin will be empowered and the loser demoralized, affecting the morale of the fighters in the next state that erupts into open conflict.

One way workers in Wisconsin can strengthen their hand is by separating their so-called friends from their real friends. Everybody from President Obama to hordes of Democratic politicians have come out in support of the Wisconsin workers, which is fine. Unacceptable, however, is the motives of many of these politicians, which have hidden dangers for workers across the U.S. who are attempting to mount a defense of their livelihoods.

For example, the Democrats’ sudden pro-labor stance was based on the very specific attack by the Republican Governor in Wisconsin — the elimination of collective bargaining rights for the various state and other public sector unions; the very foundation of the union’s existence.

At the same time, however, Democrats all over the country are cooperating with Republicans in launching a massive attack on the wages and benefits of public employees, scapegoating them for the deficits caused by Wall Street’s recession and the corporate sector in general, the real “base” of the Democrats.

White House spokesman Jay Carney made this point very clear:

“[the President] is very understanding of the need for state governments, governors, state legislatures to reduce spending to make tough choices [cuts to public workers] to be fiscally responsible, but he also feels very strongly that we need not make this an assault on the collective bargaining rights of workers in any given state.”

Workers in Wisconsin and elsewhere strongly disagree.

Sadly, the right-wing policies of the Republican Governor in Wisconsin are only slightly more anti-worker than the Democratic Governors in California, New York, Washington, Oregon, and elsewhere, who are dumping state deficits onto the backs of state workers and those who benefit from their services.

Sadder still is that both Democrats and labor leaders in Wisconsin have stated that they are willing to make all kinds of concessions; they just want the right to collectively bargain so that wages and benefits can be “compromised” away at the bargaining table, rather than being summarily slashed by the governor.

A win in Wisconsin will not simply be a rejection of the Governor’s bill and the continuation of bargaining rights for the union; rather, workers will feel that they have won if their health care, pension, and wages are not reduced, which is the real reason that many of them are fighting.

This is the main point that many Democratic “friends of labor” purposely miss. The Democrats want labor unions to exist as an institution because they are good machines for getting workers to vote Democrat, while also helping Democratic politicians make wage and benefit reductions “acceptable” to workers through collective bargaining.

The workers in Wisconsin are fighting for their collective bargaining rights because they aim to use the union to increase or maintain their standard of living, since any union that fails to do this is a union in name only.

To keep their standard of living state workers will need to demand that taxes on the wealthy and corporations are increased, since Democratic and Republican Governors continually explain that “there is no money” to fund wages and benefits.

There is in fact money, lots of it. Inequality in the U.S. has risen for decades as the richest 1 percent has acquired unheard of wealth through low taxation and corporate tax breaks. In Wisconsin, for instance, Gov. Walker has managed to pass, with bi-partisan support, a number of tax breaks geared towards benefiting big business. According to the Associated Press, these give aways add \$117 million to the state’s budget problems – close to the amount Walker is trying to squeeze out of the public workers.

State workers also need to demand that governments at the municipal, state and federal level create millions of jobs in public works, by again, taxing the rich, the corporations, and Wall Street. These demands have the potential to mobilize millions in the streets, both union and non-union workers, employed and unemployed. It is the only way to unite and mobilize working people while separating their “Democratic Party friends” from their real friends.

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