

The Attack on Ohio's Working People: What's the strategy to fight back and win?

September 7, 2011

Ohio's working people—both those with jobs, the unemployed and their families—are under attack as they have not been for decades. And this is not just in Ohio. From Wisconsin to Florida, from California to New York, employers, the media and politicians are working 24/7 to lower our wages, reduce our benefits, postpone our retirement, cut social services such as health and education, and in many other ways large and small to take away hard-won gains from working people in order to increase profits for the corporations and dividends for the wealthy.

While the Republicans, urged on by the Tea Party, have been most aggressive in attacking labor unions, Democrats have joined them in state after state in cutting budgets and laying off public workers. The slogan everywhere is the same: austerity. Bosses, politicians and the media tell us: Learn to live with less. A lot less.

Working people aren't accepting this prescription—and good for us: We shouldn't. Since the election in November 2010 public employees have participated in massive demonstrations of more than 100,000 in Wisconsin and rallies as large as 25,000 in Columbus. In Madison, Wis., people of all sorts—unions, students and other community members—occupied the state capitol, preventing business as usual. Students by the thousands have walked out of high schools to protest education cuts and teacher layoffs in Wisconsin, New Jersey and California. In towns and cities throughout the country, working people and the unemployed have showed up at city council, county board and state legislative hearings to speak out against service cuts and layoffs; and, when that hasn't been enough, they have rallied, protested, and demonstrated. And they have engaged in some of the largest popular political movements we've seen in years, circulating petitions to recall officials or to hold referendums on anti-worker laws.

All of this is good: from the occupation of the capitol in Madison and the massive demonstrations there and in Columbus, to the student strikes and citizen outrage over the attack on our standard of living. So, too, are the political movements to recall anti-worker politicians and overturn anti-worker legislation. We should all be involved in this, working to educate the public to defeat Issue 2 (the former SB5), Ohio's anti-union law, and to stop HB 194, the voter suppression law.

While we're involved in this political work, however, there's a larger question: What is the strategy that can win and begin to turn the tide against these new, right-wing movements that threaten the livelihoods and way of life of millions upon millions? What will it take to turn the tide? For the last four decades unions have declined in members, in economic power and in political clout. Working people more broadly have lost power and consequently have lost their standard of living. What is it going to take to change things?

While stopping Issue 2, the anti-union law, and H.B.194, the voter suppression law, are important, we need to be building a movement that uses its economic power in the workplace, its social power in the streets, as well as its political power in elections. Real social change in America happens when millions act. The great industrial labor unions were originally organized through sit-down strikes occupying factories and mass picket lines that fought for unions against the employers' security guards and police. The civil rights ended legal segregation in the South and won voting rights through mass protests and civil disobedience in which thousands went to jail. The women's movement won equality over several generations by direct action, voting in violation of the law,

chaining themselves to the White House fence in the 1910s and protest marches in the 1970s. The environmental movement and the gay and lesbian movement have used the same tactics of protest, civil disobedience and a willingness to challenge unjust laws by breaking them. Such movements are not built from the top down by bureaucracies; they are built from the ground up by ordinary people in movements that are democratic, participatory, confrontational and threatening to the powers-that-be. That's what we need now. How do we get there?

Worker uprising

Last winter, immediately after the election of Republican Gov. John Kasich, he pressed for—and the Republican Party in the Ohio State Legislature passed—Senate Bill 5 (S.B. 5), a radical, right-wing law that took away many of the rights of Ohio workers. S.B. 5 reduced public employees' bargaining rights, increased workers' contributions to their health care to a mandatory 15 percent, took away police and fire rights to negotiate over safety equipment, threatened striking workers with stiff economic penalties and jail, denied teachers the right to negotiate over class size, tied teachers' wages to test scores and threatened college teachers' right to negotiate a contract. The law affected hundreds of thousands of public workers in Ohio, threatening to reduce their bargaining power and lower their standard of living.

Nor was that all. Shortly afterward, the Republican-dominated legislature passed Kasich's budget, which cut \$2 billion from local governments and school districts; some would have their budgets slashed by 50 percent. One report ("Innovation Ohio, Budget Job Loss Report") suggests that Kasich's budget would lead to the loss of 51,000 public service jobs. Something like a quarter of a million Ohioans in the families of those public workers will be directly affected. And, of course, as the public workers lose their jobs, they will be forced to stop eating out; buying food, clothing, TVs, cars and all the other usual stuff; leading to thousands more layoffs in the private sector. And this in the midst of the worst depression in our country since 1929.

Kasich has not been alone his attack on working people. In Wisconsin last winter Gov. Scott Walker introduced his so-called Budget Repair bill, which contained provisions eliminating collective bargaining. That led thousands of workers—sometimes as many as 100,000—to demonstrate at the capitol building in Madison during February and March. The massive protests were accompanied by strikes by Wisconsin schoolteachers and by the day-and-night occupation of the capitol building by as many as 3,000 workers. Once the movement had begun, hundreds of workers from other states flew or drove in to join the protests. The United States had not seen such a massive worker uprising in years.

Walker had cleverly attempted to divide the public workers by excluding police and firefighters from his anti-union law, and the media have worked to divide public employees against private sector workers. Yet both firefighters and private-sector workers showed up at the Statehouse to join public workers of all sorts, and then students and local residents joined them until Madison became the site one of the largest workers' demonstrations in the United States in decades. A roiling, roaring river of demonstrators, carrying signs and banners, some festooned in union regalia and others in the Wisconsin football fans' cheese-head hats, marched down State Street, then into and around the capitol. Only California has seen demonstrations as large as these in recent years. This was the beginning of a new American workers movement.

The Wisconsin events gained an added significance because they happened to coincide with the beginning of the democratic revolution sweeping the Arab world. Many demonstrators in Madison, taking a clue from the rebellions against authoritarian and anti-worker governments in the Middle East, carried signs saying, "Let's negotiate like they do in Egypt" and "Walk like an Egyptian." Demonstrators in Tahrir Square in Cairo responded by carrying signs in solidarity with Wisconsin

workers. For a moment it seemed as if there were one revolutionary movement stretching from the Nile to Lake Michigan. While the situation in Madison was hardly comparable to the revolution in the Arab world, what we witnessed in Wisconsin was a working-class upheaval without precedent, at least not since the 1970s.

Power turned off

Feeling a sense of power and at the same time a need for greater force if they were to defeat Walker and the Republicans, Madison's South Central Federation of Labor put the issue of a general strike on the table. *The Capitol Times* asked, "Could a General Strike Happen Here?" and answered that it seemed possible. Yet, as became clear, the consciousness, sense of solidarity, organization and will to risk a fight were not there. Key groups like teachers and firefighters declined the challenge, and many private-sector workers had not yet come to see the public employees' fight as their own. Nor had African-American workers and Latino immigrants come to see the public employees' fight as their own. The raising of the slogan of a general strike itself, however, had affected the consciousness of the strike activists and leaders, leading them to explore just how far they could push the resistance.

Yet, within a week the AFL-CIO unions, the Service Employees International Union, the national leadership of AFSCME and the AFT were sending national leaders and staff to attempt to take control of the movement and channel it away from the building occupation and strikes and into political action and support for the Democratic Party. While some union officials in Madison, including local leaders of the AFL-CIO, talked about expanding the strike action of the teachers and even talked about the possibility of a "general strike," most upper-level union officials worked to put the brakes on the movement. Union officials worked to get protesters out of the capitol building, while at the crucial moment the Wisconsin teachers union leader told teachers to get back to work.

At the same time, state union officials, working with the Democratic Party, began to channel the Wisconsin movement into a recall effort. Union leaders and Democratic Party operatives, uncomfortable with the building occupations, strikes and raucous protests by workers and their supporters, wanted to channel the movement into mainstream politics. Union members were quickly organized to circulate petitions to recall Republican state legislators in order to change the balance of power in the legislature by removing them and electing Democrats. The Democrats eventually succeeded in forcing six Republicans into recall elections and defeating some of them. At the same time, the Republicans forced two Democrats into recall elections, but those two succeeded in holding onto their seats. The Republicans held on to control of the Senate by a slim 17-16 majority, and both sides claimed victory. Clearly the Democrats had succeeded in improving their representation in the Senate through the recalls, but they did not achieve the result they had hoped for.

Similarly in Ohio, where there had been protests, but never the same kind of upheaval from below as in Wisconsin, labor officials and the Democratic Party worked to channel the movement into circulating referendum petitions to put Gov. Kasich's even more draconian anti-union legislation on the ballot in November. The Democratic Party and the AFL-CIO and other unions succeeded in collecting almost 1.3 million signatures, a remarkable achievement and enough to put S.B. 5—now called Issue 2—on the ballot for November 2011. Never in my lifetime have I seen so many working people, thousands in Wisconsin and Ohio, going door to door to talk to workers about the need for workers' rights and union power. We have a new American workers' movement.

Since then the unions and other opponents of the law have been walking the precincts, talking to voters and handing out literature at events like Black Family Reunion in Cincinnati. While there is a lot of public sentiment against the law, especially among working people white and black,

overturning it November will be no easy task. This is an off-year election with no presidential or congressional candidates, and voter turnout is usually low.

All of this has been complicated by the Republican attempt to make matters even more difficult by disenfranchising working people. Ohio' Republicans passed H.B. 194, which will suppress the votes of workers, African Americans, the poor, the elderly, the homeless and other vulnerable populations through restrictive measures such as reducing in-person early voting from 15 to 12 days, reducing mail-in voting from 35 to 21 days, more aggressively purging voter lists and more demanding requirements such as full social-security numbers on absentee ballots. The law will also force election officials to throw out more ballots where simple errors still left a voter's intent clear. Poll workers will not be allowed to direct voters to the right precinct or to help voters who request assistance in filling out forms. The state will not allow absentee-ballot requests to be mailed to all registered voters to shorten Election Day lines; but at the same time, poll cannot be opened early to accommodate those who would like to vote then. So the Democrats and the AFL-CIO have made H.B. 194 the subject of another petition, which would put a referendum on the ballot in November 2012.

Choosing our turf

There is no doubt that voters should take action to defeat Issue 2 (the former S.B. 5) and H.B.194. The problem is that defeating those bills will not in itself create the social power necessary to stop the attack on working people.

Think about it: If we succeed in defeating Issue 2—and we will—that simply takes us back to last year. How were we doing last year? Were our unions strong then? Were we beating back the corporate attack? Were we expanding workers' power and winning higher wages and better benefits, improving society for all?

Going back to yesterday, to last year, or to two or three years ago won't work because our problems didn't begin with the most recent economic crisis or with the Tea Party. Our unions have been growing smaller, weaker and less influential since the 1980s. American workers' wages have stagnated, our working conditions have gotten worse, and our voice on the job has been stifled.

Today the Democratic Party and its junior partners in the AFL-CIO unions are determining the strategy for fighting Kasich, Scott and the Republican agenda in the Midwestern states. The strategy has been to move away from protests, building occupations and strikes and to channel all efforts into recall and referendum efforts. The results have been impressive: Thousands have been trained first to collect petition signatures and then to walk precincts, knock and doors and make phone calls to voters. So far things have gone pretty well, recalling a few Republicans in Wisconsin and putting the referendum on the ballot in Ohio. So what's the problem?

The problems are these.

First, when we decide to play politics, we are playing on *their* turf. The political system of the United States is dominated by corporate financing and by the corporate media. With the corporations and the media in control of the system, we have little chance for victory even though we have the numbers. We should not play on only *their* turf, but also on *ours*: the workplace and the streets.

The unions have, to their credit, summoned up an army of petition pushers and door knockers. They should turn those folks into an army of activists involved in union-organizing campaigns in the workplace and in social protests on the streets. Of the perhaps 10,000 union members who have worked to stop S.B. 5 would there be 1,000 willing to surround a non-union workplace, block a road,

take over a public building at the risk of being arrested? We need to take the struggle to the streets—and most important, to work.

Second, while it has been impressive in its way, the Democratic Party and AFL-CIO union-mobilization campaign has been entirely top-down, an approach that limits the movement's effectiveness. Much like regular Central Labor Council meetings, the state and regional AFL-CIO leadership tells the ranks what to do, and the ranks are expected to obey. Every meeting is a pep rally or training meeting. Discussion of the political strategy and of the methods has never been on the table. Debate apparently has no place in the official union movement. There are no mass meetings where the floor is open and speech is free.

The Democratic Party and AFL-CIO coalitions are entirely formalistic. Created from above by agreements between the leaderships of various groups, they do not make possible much engagement, and interaction among the ranks of the various organizations involved is not likely to take place. Unlike the first few weeks of protest in Wisconsin, which produced all sorts of activities, organization, opinions and strategies, since then in Wisconsin and since the beginning in Ohio, the creativity of working people has not been tapped. Nor do the leaders want it to be. The Democrats and the AFL-CIO share a fear that things might get out of hand—and who knows what would happen then?

Third, the unions have adopted a rhetoric—"Save the Middle Class"—that narrows the movement's goals and limits its appeal. Middle class? What does middle class mean? A home in the suburbs, a relatively new car, a big-screen TV, being able to afford to send kids to college? Middle class sounds all too comfortable—and all too white. If that's the definition, then it excludes millions of working people, including millions of union members. I know union members who are working in union jobs as secretaries, teachers' aids and in other positions, who qualify for food stamps. I know folks working at union factory or warehouse jobs at \$9 an hour. Is that "middle class"? Many African-American and Latino workers have never entered the middle class if that means economic stability and real opportunity. We should not be talking about "saving the middle class" but rather about mobilizing the entire working class so that we can all lift ourselves and each other up out of poverty, insecurity, and in many cases out of exploitation and oppression.

Fourth, the entire purpose of the recall and referendum campaigns has been to get people out of militant protest and into the electoral arena, where we are being asked to vote for the Democrats. While by and large they might be better than the Republicans, the problem is that, just like their opponents, the Dems are committed to austerity, budget cuts and layoffs.

Time for a new party?

Look at this little round-up of the states:

- **New York:** "To the soundtrack of chanting protesters who draped banners from staircases and banged on the doors of the legislative chambers, lawmakers finished approving (Democratic) Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo's budget early Thursday morning, making for the state's first on-time spending plan in five years. ... Outside the entrance to the Senate gallery, hundreds of people chanted about Mr. Cuomo's cuts to schools and his opposition to extending a tax surcharge on wealthy New Yorkers." (*New York Times*)
- **Connecticut:** "(Democratic) Gov. Dannel P. Malloy unveiled one of the largest budget-cutting plans in recent history Friday, targeting more than 3,600 Executive Branch jobs for layoffs

while eliminating funding for more than 6,500 jobs in total. The governor's plan also carves deeply into social services and health care—an area Malloy pledged to protect during last fall's campaign—(and) transportation, prisons and education while eliminating dozens of programs and closing numerous facilities. Those changes also likely mean a new asset test for certain Medicaid patients, increased bus, rail and other transit fares and a 1.5 percent cap on raises for unionized workers who weren't laid off." (*The Connecticut Mirror*)

- **Washington State:** "House Democrats rolled out a budget plan Monday that closes a \$5 billion-plus budget gap by slashing funds for public schools, colleges, hospitals and other pieces of the health-care safety net. The spending plan also eliminates 1,619 more jobs in state government and higher education after July 1, assumes a 3 percent pay cut for most state workers and ends automatic cost-of-living raises for some state pensioners." (*The News Tribune*)
- **California:** "(Democratic) Gov. Jerry Brown has released his proposal to close the state's \$25 billion budget gap, which makes up roughly a third of the state's general fund budget. The plan includes \$12.5 billion in spending cuts, primarily to entitlements and \$12 billion from a five-year extension of the 'temporary' income- and sales-tax hikes that the legislature passed two years ago." (*Wall Street Journal*.)

Just like the Republicans, in state after state the Democrats are cutting budgets, reducing public services and laying off public employees. While in addition to cutting budgets they have sometimes sought some new taxes as well, in general they have passed regressive taxes while declining to tax banks, corporations, their profits and the wealthy. We cannot win as long as we make our strategy is entirely dependent upon the Democratic Party. We have to have an open discussion about political alternatives. Since the Democrats so often vote for austerity, maybe unions need to nominate their own members in the primaries, with the understanding that, if they lose, they will *not* loyally support some corporate candidate. With the Republicans and the Democrats both supporting an austerity budget, perhaps it's time for a working people's party.

Perhaps the leaders of AFL-CIO themselves are beginning to understand that the Democratic Party doesn't necessarily represent their interests. AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka recently told reporters at a breakfast roundtable hosted by the *Christian Science Monitor*, "This is a moment that working people and quite frankly history will judge President Obama on his presidency. Will he commit all his energy and focus on bold solutions on the job crisis or will he continue to work with the Tea Party to offer cuts to middle-class programs like Social Security, all the while pretending the deficit is where our economic problems really lie?"

Maybe we can now think the unthinkable: working people organizing themselves to give leadership to the nation.

We in Ohio, in the Midwest, in America are facing the biggest challenge of our lives. We are foolish if we are not to hold open free-for-all discussions of our vision, our principles and our strategy. The abolitionists, the suffragists, the civil-rights militants, the anti-war activists, the feminists, the gay and lesbian freedom fighters would never have succeeded had they allowed themselves to be limited in their discussions and their actions. When a real movement arises—and there is no doubt that it will—it will sweep aside political tradition, bureaucratic caution and phony rhetoric, and as has happened every few generations throughout our history, create a broad, open democratic movement for change. We can help make it happen.

Dan La Botz is a Cincinnati based teacher, writer and activist. This article was published in the Cincinnati-based independent non-profit newspaper, Article 25.