

# Wisconsin's Cheesehead Revolt

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By THIS TIME, the usual *New Politics* reader may well have seen dozens if not hundreds of Youtube videos revealing the demonstrations in Madison, Wisconsin, during February and March, not to mention sights and sounds of solidarity-with-Wisconsin rallies around the country and in their own community. (Being good *New Politics* readers, they would have joined in.) The details have been hard to follow, even close to the scene. Each day from late winter to late spring brought some new twist on the venality of the governor, put in office with a less than convincing vote, thanks to rightwing cashflows and also thanks to disillusionment with the Democrats. And nearly every week brought some new measure of solidarity within the state or from those coming to express good wishes. Look carefully at those photos and Youtube images of crowds marching around the capitol (or milling inside, during three February weeks), and you are certain to see joy along with rage, the palpable enjoyment of people from all walks of life united in a cause, strangers to each other no longer.

Why Wisconsin? And why has the movement against the Right been marked by such good spirit, such militant non-violence, even avowed sympathy from the local police? Let's back up a little. Wisconsin has known plenty of labor-connected violence, from the Bay View Massacre of 1886 to the National Guard crackdown on Allis-Chalmers, crushing a leftwing local as the Second World War ended. Madison, the state capital, has been a largely white-collar city, especially since the closing of the Gisholt Steel complex that had thrived in wartime but dwindled by the 1960s. Oscar Meyer, once a hometown business but now only part of a corporate giant, is a lonely factory survivor.

Still, state workers by the tens of thousands play a vital role in every part of the economy and culture, joined by many thousands of health workers, as the city has become a center of state services of various kinds — and a tourist destination. These working people heavily supported the changeover of city administrations, with the counter-culture-flavored leadership of the recently re-elected, former student radical Paul Soglin. He was an affable administrator with his own, anti-interventionist foreign policy and a progressive, eco-conscious city council.

This sounds more chummy than in real life, reflecting an old habit of Madison's collective self-congratulation, the liberal city that somehow gives developers nearly everything they want ... after a nice, civil discussion. And invites white-collar corporations with Pentagon contracts to expand the sprawl, with tax-breaks to boot. Progressives have had a hard time since the 1990s when as a third-party beyond official Democratic control, they held a majority in the city council. The Chamber of Commerce has been sneaking forward, and the the last mayor's eagerness to overrule landmarked heritage decisions for the sake of a vastly expanded downtown hotel marked a major and flagrant

business-class victory.

More to the point here, unions have been boxed in by rock-ribbed Republicans and business Democrats. No governor proposed wiping them out until now, but the Milwaukee-based Bradley Foundation has had a blueprint for twenty years with the same goals in mind. Teaparty Republicans, playing their hand or overplaying it (according to different views), empowered by the elections but no more empowered than Republicans in state power of earlier generations, are determined to press the case against state employees.

The most dramatic piece of state labor history in the last half-century has been, without a doubt, the little Teaching Assistants Association at the University of Wisconsin. Their origin, in the overstaffing of discussion sections among many other issues, goes back to the early and middle 1960s. Their victory goes back to the 1970 strike, and the student peace activism that shut down the campus intermittently from 1967 onward.

There's the rub. In October of 1967, a nonviolent sit-in against the recruitment on campus by Dow Chemical, makers of napalm used widely and with vast destructive effects in Vietnam, was set upon by city police. A high official of the police force, best known for the John Birch Society pamphlets in his waiting room, poised for action as university officials caved into Board of Regents demands to clear the building. Dow recruiters might have announced their meetings off campus, of course; and university officials might have openly requested them to do so. No such. Right here, the new era of Madison began, although it took a half-dozen years or so for the adjustment to register in city hall. Always suspect in most of the state for liberalism, Madison became a veritable hothouse of cooperative enterprises, antiwar, feminist and gay, ecological sentiment, and a live-and-let-live lifestyle that suited government workers quite as much as committed leftwingers.

Lots else naturally happened between those days of wine (that is to say, inexpensive marijuana) and roses (daisies placed in the end of National Guard rifles—we really put them there) and the mostly gloomy present. On the one hand, the grand newspaper strike of the later 1970s, broken but leading to a worker-owned press that died only when Soglin's designated successor was beaten by a bank candidate; on the other hand, the TAA and the other white collar unions of the district, including the growing suburbs, successful dug in, elected mostly pro-labor politicians, and provided real benefits. For society's least fortunate, such as special needs children, Dane County pushed the state forward toward model policies of humane care and training. It was no small thing.

The Walker proposal for a "budget repair," effectively wiping out collective bargaining for state employees among other ills, came as a shock. No Republican governor had attempted anything like this, not even "Tommy" Thompson, the state's dominant, that is to say, bullying, political figure at the end of the century. Suddenly, thousands of perfectly ordinary residents, including many teachers and their husbands, wives or domestic partners, also prison employees, health workers of all kinds and sundry crafts employed by the state, stepped forward. As a later formula had it, "Facebook called them out, Twitter organized them, and Youtube documented them."

The impression of spontaneous action in the mass outpouring, day after day, and the unprecedented crowds over the weekend, was misleading. The scene had been set politically not only by the threatened (soon, enacted) vote by the Republican-dominated legislature to carry out the measures, but also by the departure of fourteen Democratic state senators, crossing into Illinois (a small Wisconsin joke: leaving the state for a weekend by going to Illinois is unthinkable to the state that draws hundreds of thousands of Illinoisans every summer for lakes, taverns and the sex trade). As unlikely as it seems, Democrats with their backs against the wall had acted boldly. They always seemed to be looking for an opportunity to compromise, but the other side was uninterested.

So when an NEA affiliate, as well as AFSCME and also the AFT (representing mostly health workers, and a few scattered locals of teachers, mostly in small towns) worked hard to mobilize their members, along with Teamsters, dozens of craft locals, painters to boilermakers, rarely seen in solidarity actions, they were acting with a kind of permission. But it is also true that the turnout exceeded anyone's prediction, and raised the projections as well as the actual work of mobilization by the unions ever upward. Not to mention the ardent support by city police, county sheriffs, and firefighters, all of them legally protected from the worst effects of the so-called budget repair bill. And not to mention the hundreds of high school and middle school students marching from their schools to Capitol Square, holding up signs as proof of their devotion to their teachers. Electrified by music and chanting, they were having fun without a moment of unplanned disorder.

Behind the scenes or within the scenes, especially when the crowd set itself to occupy the Capitol building through the nights of protest, the logistical work of Teaching Assistants was the most remarkable. In a sense, they had been preparing for this moment since 1970-71, when the University of Wisconsin first reluctantly agreed to a contract, something contested every decade or so. Recent developments — actually, a secret agreement between the Chancellor of the university (herself a former UW grad student and TAA member!) and the Governor to give the school a special status and incidentally wipe out the TAA — set the young unionists in quiet organizing sessions. They were fighting for the union's life, skillfully.

One of the strangest series of events happened early, on Day 5. A planned Tea Party counter-demonstration flopped, with perhaps 300 to offset the 30,000 demonstrators. The Fox News audience had been revved up by warnings of chaos on the streets, not to mention imagined union bosses and their paid thugs. Actually, because this was the first Saturday of public events, people of all types, schoolchildren, teachers, oldtimers from the 1960s (labor and/or civil rights as much as the antiwar or student movements), more than 90 percent from assorted parts of Wisconsin but visitors from Chicago, Minnesota, and Iowa, some nostalgics from East or West Coast had come to revive their memories of youthful radicalism on the campus. It was a demographic revolution as well, in no small part because the service unions like SEIU are as heavy with minorities and women as the roofers are still white and male.

The crowd of the next day, a Sunday, was a bit smaller but perhaps even stranger. A brief troupe of four blow-up reindeer, eight feet high, with a sign, WHITE TAILS FOR WORKERS. The issues of the deer populations never leave Wisconsin politics for a day. One of the favorite signs of the crowd — measured by the number of people who patted an arm or slapped the back of the sign-holder — amounted to only four words: BEER CHEESE BRATS UNIONS. Wisconsinites have them, love them, don't intend to lose them.

Another weekend soon after saw, on a Saturday, New York State Troopers with their banner, and some National Troopers Coalition folks marching. Sometimes stopping to shake hands with the state police (whose leader has denounced the governor). Sunday saw several hundred National Letter Carriers folks (including their national veep, a great speaker, hailing from Minnesota), mainly Illinois, some Iowa, Nebraska, North Dakota, Minnesota, Michigan. To the friendly pats and waves of "Thank You" came back "Thank you, glad to be here." Also Michael Moore, who gave a spectacular speech, also the singing of "The Star Spangled Banner" (a half dozen voices rung out, a second afterward, "Play Ball!"), followed shortly by versions of "Solidarity Forever" and "This Land Is Your Land" by a visiting Tom Morello, formerly with Rage Against the Machine.

As the days wore on, and the total non-violence allowed the aged and parents with babes in arms to march again and again without anxiety, as more folks were bringing dogs (often with signs on them) and kids walking along, the usual (and instinctive, during my lifetime of demonstrations) craving of uniformed police to demand and command order disintegrated. Madison police, whose

chief declared he would not enforce orders asking his men and women to become storm troopers, had relatives aplenty among teachers and social workers, and they were downright friendly. Sheriffs from distant parts of the state were cool and suspicious at first. Then things eased as they brought their families to Madison for the weekend — a normal tourist thing to do — or snapped pictures of each other and us with cellphone cameras for the folks back home. It could not be worth their time to compile photos for FBI or Red Squad files; there are just too many of us looking affable. Put another way: the threat of official violence had been neutralized.

But where was it going, especially after the crowd of 150,000 rocked the Capitol inside and out, easily the largest political demonstration in Wisconsin history? The IWW had never entirely disappeared from Madison, although its presence in recent years had been largely limited to a print shop in the left-leaning East Side. Wobblies, armed with a new poster drawn by Eric Drooker, talked about a General Strike, and even the official newspaper of the region's AFL-CIO carried a serious discussion of how and under what conditions a general strike of government workers or others, perhaps all others, might be carried out.

The "Myth of the general strike," an idea propounded almost a century ago by French syndicalist Georges Sorel, had shrewdly suggested that the myth was a fact in itself, a vision of a revolution that swept away the existing system and replaced it with real economic and social democracy. And this was the real sense of a general strike in Wisconsin. For public workers to have struck would have proved the Republicans' claim that they were more interested in money than in the public welfare; rather, by insisting that everything but union status was negotiable, public unions took money off their table. They were asking for dignity, for the right to exist as a collective body. It was the most powerful appeal possible. The General Strike, then, was akin to "Free Huey Or the Sky's the Limit," a warning to California authorities not to send away Huey Newton or kill him. (They didn't, although Newton turned out to be rather a disappointment in other respects.)

If not a General Strike, what could the crowd and its leaders, such as they were, actually do? Legal stratagems followed, aided by some small victories along those lines. A massive campaign to elect a liberal or even progressive candidate for the state supreme court over an outspoken reactionary turned out enthusiasts in numbers and vigor not seen since the Obama campaign of 2008. In the end, perhaps through ballot manipulation, the Right won again. But the notion has persisted that by rolling up petitions for the recall of a number of Republicans in the legislature, a real change can be affected, or such a scare thrown into the GOP that the unions, environmentalists, supporters of women's rights and others can rest a bit easy and prepare for more.

So it stands as this issue of *New Politics* goes into production. Each week, often each day, of the Wisconsin battle has brought surprises. Each demonstration has sprouted dozens of new and often funny, homemade signs ridiculing the Republicans and especially the Governor, along with his cronies. The spirit is very much alive. Where will it find its top form again?

## **Footnotes**