

The New American Workers Movement and the Confrontation to Come

February 26, 2011

The new American workers movement—born in the last few weeks in the giant protests in Wisconsin and Ohio—faces a fateful confrontation this coming week. In Madison and Columbus, Republican legislators are pushing to abolish public employee labor unions and tens of thousands of workers are protesting and resisting. We have seen nothing like this face off between workers and bosses in the United States since the labor upheaval of the early 1970s, though the issues in the balance are more like those of the 1930s. The very existence of the American labor movement is at stake. The question is: What will it take to win?

What a movement this has become in just a couple of weeks. In the fight to preserve public employees' right to unionize, tens of thousands—as many as 70,000 on one day—have demonstrated in Wisconsin. There they have maintained a permanent occupation of the state capitol building and sustained a mass movement seething around it. In Columbus, Ohio there have been several demonstrations at that state capitol building, one of as large as 10,000 workers. And there are plans for more demonstrations in Columbus to continue the pressure. In Indianapolis where thousands of steelworkers and autoworkers demonstrated and Democrats fled to prevent a vote, the Republicans have agreed to take their “right-to-work” law off the table.

From the Midwest to the Coasts: Solidarity

At the center of this movement, in Madison, Wisconsin, a new conception of the workers' movement has been created. For decades American workers have fought to improve their lives within the parochial confines of a particular union. Each union largely ignored other unions (except when it competed with them) and often neglected the issues of the labor movement as a whole, to say nothing of the broader issues of the working class, most of which has no union. Suddenly we have a real labor movement again, where public sector unions join together with private sector unions, pipefitters march with professors, steel workers with secretaries, and computer programmers with the sanitation workers. And the unionized workers are often joined by non-union supporters.

Not only that, but in Madison community members and college students have swelled the picketlines. Even high school students have come out in numbers. And everybody who stands on the right side of the class line is welcome. As the movement opens up, so do minds. Union members are snatching up the leaflets of their unions, but also taking copies of the union reform paper *Labor Notes*. Workers and supporters listen to the Democratic Party politicians who come through and they grab up too the newspapers of the socialist organizations and chat with leftists. Where the struggle is at its peak in Wisconsin, the labor unions are becoming a workers' movement again and the old concept of labor solidarity, that “An injury to one is an injury to all,” has been reborn in the marches, the protest rallies, and the chants to “Kill the bill.”

This movement is not confined to the Midwest. Around the country workers are showing solidarity and support this movement. California union members, at least 150 of them have flown two thousand miles to join the picket lines in Madison. Demonstrations have been held to support the Wisconsin workers from Vermont to Atlanta and in many other cities around the country. We now have a new national workers movement propelled from below by the energy, enthusiasm, and creativity of the rank and file.

The Stakes: Enormous

We had better have a big movement. The stakes in this battle between the right and the workers' movement are enormous. The Republicans in Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana would like to break the unions, to eliminate them altogether as a factor in American life. The proposed legislation would end public employees' right to unionize, strike, and bargain. The legislative elimination of the unions would mean the end of "dues check off," that is, the automatic deduction of union dues from members paychecks, undermining the economic viability of the unions.

Some on the left argue, and with some merit, that dues check off itself has undermined the union movement. When, in the old days, union stewards collected due by hand, member by member, they had to listen and respond to members' concerns and complaints. Once the boss was collecting the dues for the union, it was another story. The money went directly into the bank providing unions with a steady flow of cash but eliminating that direct relationship to members and the steady flow of comments and grievances that once came along with the dues.

While there is some truth in that argument, the kernel of truth being the unions' need for democracy and member control, to cut off the funding of the unions as they are now will be devastating. Union halls would close, union staff would be laid off, and union programs would fold up. The national unions would no doubt continue to support unions in states where they were broken, but on the state and local level unions, while continuing to exist, would be reduced to a hard core of dedicated activists with much less power.

The breaking of these unions would also mean the ripping up of the contracts that protect their members. Many of these are contracts that not only insure decent wages, but also protect health benefits, working conditions, and provide grievance procedures for workers' complaints. Union contracts have protected not only the wages, but also the rights of members. They have created a sense of workplace citizenship and of equality, one might say, that is, the understanding that we are all as workers entitled to the same rights and protections.

What Would a Union Free Environment Mean?

The Republicans want to break the unions because it would reduce the unions' power both in politics and in the workplace. The Democratic Party would no longer be able to count on the unions' treasuries and members to finance a good part of their election efforts and to provide the troops who do the calling and door knocking. Government supervisors could work workers harder and pay them less. The weakened public employee unions would mean less union influence in society, leading to an even further weakening of private sector unions. Because breaking the unions in the public sector, however, is only a first step. The real end goal is to finish them off the unions in industry and especially manufacturing where all the real wealth of society is actually produced.

There are other implications as well. Unions, for all of their problems, and the problems are many—the national officers' high salaries, the organizational bureaucracy, unresponsive officials, racial and gender inequities, political "less evilism" and subservience to the Democratic Party—still, the unions often throw their weight into the scales on the side of many important causes. Even while they may exhibit backwards racial and gender politics within the union, they still often support causes of racial and gender justice in society.

With all of their problems, unions represent the weight of the working class in society and in politics. And even if their weight, because of their reliance on the Democrats, is not always translated into power, still the organization of the working class into the unions represents the most important factor in American democracy. Without the unions, the financial and industrial oligarchy,

which already holds power, may wield that power with impunity.

What Will It Take to Win?

The movement has already exhibited great potential and shown some power. The demonstrations by tens of thousands who have participated in the Midwest supported by thousands in other states have been more than symbolic. This is a mobilization of workers who are also taxpayers and voters, and the Republicans know it and fear it. In Wisconsin, this mobilization has been accompanied by the occupation of the capitol and by what was for a day or two a virtual general strike by teachers in the state.

The tremendous mobilization of tens of thousands of workers which has taken place so far is indeed impressive, but it is not clear that that alone can stop the Republicans and their corporate backers from passing the legislation. Workers have concentrated on the occupation of the capitol, but they also have still untapped power of numbers in the streets, using civil disobedience to disrupt government and business. Groups of workers prepared to go jail for their rights would raise the level of struggle in Wisconsin and throughout the state.

Workers also have greater power both in the economy and in society which they have not used to the fullest. The strike is a powerful weapon in this struggle. Teachers in Wisconsin have already used it both in Madison and around the state. The South Central Federation of Labor in Wisconsin has raised the idea of a general strike of all unions in the state. To be effective a general strike has to be called before the legislature votes and it has to be organized in such a manner that it both shuts down government and business and simultaneously takes charge of protecting the safety and wellbeing of the people in Wisconsin.

Around the country, hundreds of thousands of workers are looking to Wisconsin and to Ohio to take the bold steps needed to stop the Republican assault on our rights. We are watching you. We are with you.

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