

# **Wisconsin Protests Lead Public Workers Fight!**

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# Contents

<b>Walker's Lie . . . . .</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>National Attacks . . . . .</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Liberals Target Teachers . . . . .</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Build a Workers' Movement . . . . .</b>	<b>6</b>

Thousands of public workers in Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana have been waging a militant struggle to defend basic union rights as they combat a highly organized anti-union offensive. Teachers, students, nurses, firefighters, sewer and road construction workers, hospital employees, and various other public workers have filled the streets around the state capital in Madison, Wisconsin, attempting to hold back legislative action aimed at stripping away basic union rights and ushering in a right-wing corporate agenda.

Highly organized anti-union attacks are being advanced by capitalists in alliance with conservative politicians across the country that aim to destroy unions, cut social programs, and give huge tax breaks to corporate interests. The direct attack on public unions in Wisconsin is clear. After union representatives there agreed to all financial givebacks, Governor Walker refused to concede because his essential goal is to break the public unions in order to decrease the power of workers' opposition to this conservative agenda now and in the future. With all kinds of lies about how public employees get more pay than private sector workers, he unleashed a massive attack against public employees.

The facts clearly show that Wisconsin state and local governments pay public employees less wages than what are paid in the private sector. In exchange for lower wages in the past, public unions negotiated better benefits, including pensions. For years, across all sectors, unions were able to win better wages and working conditions than non-unionized workers and therefore set the bar for all workers, which helped to increase the wages of underpaid workers. But Governor Walker's refusal to accept the union's financial concessions demonstrates that this provocation had nothing to do with the state's finances, except that the financial crisis of the state provided a conservative context within which to wage this battle.

## **Walker's Lie**

Governor Walker's claim that he is trying to solve Wisconsin's budget crisis is a lie because he has been spending a lot of state money on corporate interests. His actions reveal his real agenda. Walker recently rejected the lucrative federal high-speed rail transportation funding that would have helped to close any deficit. He also rejected federal broadband development money that rural counties in Wisconsin have sought for years. And, in January 2011, Walker gave \$140 million in new tax breaks for multinational out-of-state corporations. Now why would a governor give away \$140 million to corporate interests and reject federal funding if he was worried about his state's budget crisis? The truth is that his real program is to destroy public unions, squeeze whatever concessions he can out of all working people in order to give large gifts to corporations, banks and the wealthy. In fact, by rejecting the transportation and broadband funding, he was protecting the business interests of his road-building and telecommunications friends who will benefit substantially from the absence of competition. In addition, about a month ago, a Fiscal Bureau memo reported that the Wisconsin had a \$121.4 million surplus through the current fiscal year. Despite all this, Walker continues his lie, determined to strip the unions of their collective bargaining and to punish public workers with additional layoffs because of the state's dire financial situation. Not really. But the fiscal crisis provides a good cover for his reactionary attacks on working people.

While our focus has been riveted on the union busting aspect of the Wisconsin workers' struggle, this is not the only assault underway. Section 44 of the Senate bill will enable Governor

Walker to give away control of Wisconsin's power infrastructure. The bill permits the sale of state-owned heating, cooling, and power plants for any price without approval or bids. This would amount to giving away the state-owned public infrastructure to private interests. And it just so happens that two of his gubernatorial campaign supporters, the Koch brothers (David and Charles) from Wichita, Kansas, have a direct interest in this area as they own three important companies: Flint Hills Resources (a leading refining and chemicals company connected to gasoline, diesel, jet and other fuel subsidiaries that distribute through pipelines and terminals in Junction City, Waupun, Madison, Milwaukee, Green Bay, and Stevens Point); Koch Pipeline Company (a company that operates 4,000 miles of pipelines across Wisconsin); and the C. Reiss Coal Company (a coal supplier used to generate power in Green Bay, Manitowoc, Ashland, and Sheboygan). When these three companies that the Koch brothers already own are combined with the state-owned public infrastructure (heating, cooling and power plants), the Koch brothers would control a vertical monopoly of Wisconsin power: the resources, distribution, and generation of all energy in Wisconsin. This gift to corporate interests comes at the future expense of all working and poor people in Wisconsin!

That's a nice "thank you" gift to those who financially supported his election as governor! In 2010, the Koch brothers provided Walker's campaign with over \$43,000 through Koch Industries PAC. They also gave \$1 million to the Republican Governor's Association (RGA), which then spent another \$65,000 on Walker's campaign. The RGA also spent \$3.4 million on TV ads against Walker's opponents, which helped Walker obtain a 5-point majority over his opponent. The Koch brothers' efforts to influence public policy are behind their funding and sponsorship of the Tea Party as well as their support to Americans for Prosperity, an organization with chapters in 32 states. Their program serves the interests of the owners of corporations: limiting healthcare protection, wiping out environmental regulations, and huge cuts to social programs by state and federal governments. Their main focus against labor unions is centered in states with Republican governors – Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Wisconsin. So Governor Walker is a major player in this right wing attack on working people. He is not about to walk away from this battle. He will have to be forced to back down.

## **National Attacks**

The right wing attacks extend beyond Wisconsin and are currently ripping through Florida, Arizona, Ohio, Michigan, Texas, and New Jersey as well. In each of these states, the governors are taking essential services away from the most vulnerable among us.

- In Florida, Governor Scott plans to cut 8,000 jobs, privatize large sections of state services that include Medicaid, juvenile justice facilities, and hospitals. He also plans to cut \$3 billion from education, which will put pensions of public employees, including teachers, under attack. BUT Scott is providing for the rich by cutting corporate and property taxes by at least \$4 billion!
- In Arizona, Governor Brewer is planning to save \$79.8 billion by dropping 5,200 seriously mentally ill people from the state's Medicaid program. There are also plans to remove an additional 280,000 people from the Medicaid program to save \$541.5 million. BUT Brewer, too, is taking care of the rich by signing into law \$538 million worth of corporate tax cuts!

- In Ohio, John Kasich killed Ohio's federally funded high-speed rail project that cost the state \$400 billion as well as thousands of jobs and millions of dollars in related private sector development. Although the state has an \$8 billion budget shortage, Kasich is proposing tax cuts to benefit private corporations and the rich along with privatization of public sectors. Recent Ohio protests outside the Senate targets the SB5 measure, anti-union legislation that eliminates all collective bargaining rights of Ohio's public employees (This bill is even more draconian than the one facing Wisconsin public workers.)
- In Michigan, the plan is to cut \$1.2 billion in schools, universities, and local governments while public employees are asked to give back \$1.2 million in concessions. The entire budget shortfall of \$1.7 billion will come from cuts to services and programs to the poor and middle class. BUT the governor is providing \$1.8 billion in tax cuts for businesses!
- In Texas, despite the fact that the state already has a 25 percent child poverty rate, they are considering additional deep cuts to child service programs and education. The cuts proposed are so deep that even Laura Bush, former first lady, voiced her opposition to them!
- In New Jersey, Governor Christie implemented steep cuts in education, refused to pay the state's contributions to the state pension fund, and cut assistance to local municipalities. The NJ Medicaid program is also one of Christie's targets. However, despite the financial deficit, Christie is insisting on corporate tax rate cuts to help the rich!

The nature of these attacks is clear. The pattern is the same. State governments are taking from those who have nothing to give – from poor, working and middle class people and giving to the rich – to the corporations, banks, millionaires and billionaires. This take-from-the-poor and give-to-the-rich program represents the corporate and wealthy capitalist interests. This is a struggle about power and control: working, poor, and middle class people against an organized, wealthy right wing corporate offensive.

## **Liberals Target Teachers**

The Democratic Party and their allies in the unions are unable to fight this battle because they, too, are tied to the capitalist class. President Obama and Arne Duncan, Education Secretary, supported by Mayor Bloomberg in New York City, Governor Christie in New Jersey, and most major city politicians, have led the offensive on public workers with their attacks against teachers across the country. Race to the Top, the president's big educational initiative, launched a national competition for billions of dollars based on the use of standardized tests to evaluate teachers, develop data systems, and open charter schools. Incredible amounts of federal money were given to a select few states deemed as making progress, leaving behind students in every other state without federal support to improve their educational opportunities. In an attempt to keep the focus off the complex problems of education, capitalist politicians on all sides have made teachers the target for the problems of education. No longer is the administration of a school or school system responsible for the outcomes of their organization. It is not teachers who, as employees, decide what or how to teach, nor do they control the conditions, climate, or security of the school, assessments or schedules, the presence of books and resources, prior learning experiences, access

to pre-school programs, or the nature of the professional community and professional learning. Yet, the public discourse about education today would make anyone without inside knowledge believe that teachers determine everything.

The bottom line is that teachers have been made a scapegoat for the failure of education today. One politician leading this fight is Mayor Bloomberg who has made his personal fight the threatened layoff of several thousand NYC teachers based on teacher evaluations in direct violation of the UFT contract. He is demanding that New York State change its laws so that teachers are laid off according to ability. How will this ability be determined? By student test scores, which everyone knows are not sufficiently reliable to determine the actual assessment of a student's real yearly progress, but are now going to be used not only to evaluate the worth of a teacher, but to determine in what order teachers should be laid off—all in defiance of union seniority agreements. In fact, just last year, NY State deflated ("adjusted") all its Math and English Language Arts scores because its scores had been inflated for years and the state was pressured to correct the glaring discrepancies. So using last year's scores in New York as the basis of ANY evaluation is ludicrous, by any measure. But when attacking public workers, in this case the teachers' union, what's right is not the issue. Bloomberg is not so different from Walker – they are both determined to break the union one way or another.

## **Build a Workers' Movement**

What is motivating Walker in Wisconsin also motivates Bloomberg in New York City! The big issue is the need to weaken unions as conservative politicians move to make working and poor people pay for the fiscal crisis. That adds up to major class warfare throughout the country. They are trying to sell "shared sacrifice" to make us accept paying "our" share while they manipulate money for corporate greed and profit. We need to fight back against these attempts to guilt working people into giving up what has been won over years of struggle. We need to place responsibility where it belongs: on the capitalists, their banks and corporations. Let them pay! Tax the rich, the banks, and corporations, not poor and working people! Slash the defense budget and foreign aid that props up dictatorships in other parts of the world and put the money to work here to rebuild schools, hospitals, roads, bridges, transit, water, and energy systems – the country's infrastructure. Put people back to work and build for the future!

Wisconsin public workers have taken the lead in fighting back. Their continued mobilizations show the way. Throughout the country demonstrations are needed to build momentum to roll back the right wing offensive against union organizing! Coordinated demonstrations across the country are just a beginning. The Madison, Ohio, and Indiana protests need to spread. Coordinated one day strikes can be used to build to statewide strikes. Organizing this kind of defense is what we need to meet these right wing attacks. Each union or state cannot do this alone. Statewide strikes could be used to build to a national general strike against union-busting and working class cutbacks. We must organize to support each other. We need union outreach committees to build ties to other unions, unorganized workers, and the unemployed. And we need to be prepared to go the distance. The right wing attacks are calculated and vicious. We need to organize our resistance into a movement that can defend working people. We need to stand together!

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