Chants Democratic in Wisconsin

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When I moved to Madison in 2001 to take a job as an assistant professor at the University of Wisconsin, I knew embarrassingly little about my newly adopted state's historical significance. Judging from their wisecracks about the sociology of cows, neither did my friends in New York. I soon learned about Wisconsin's prominent role in many of America's social advances, from "Fighting Bob" LaFollette's opposition to powerful railroad trusts, to pioneering contributions to social insurance, to the nation's first law for public-employee bargaining in 1959, to the turbulent campus protests against the Vietnam War in the 1960s. Little did I know that a decade after my arrival, Wisconsin would once again become "ground zero," as some commentators now call it, in America's ongoing struggle between democratic progress and reaction.

The stage was set by the wave of Republican electoral victories in 2010, which gave Republicans in Wisconsin control of both houses of the state legislature and the governor's office. However, it wasn't until February 2011 that massive protests began to appear in Madison, the state capital. The protests have been directed at the "budget repair bill" pushed by Wisconsin's new governor, Scott Walker. As a public employee and union member (American Federation of Teachers Local 223) whose home is conveniently located near the state capitol building, I have testified against the bill, participated in most of the protests, and spent a night in the capitol building. I have been accompanied by numerous colleagues and graduate student employees from the University of Wisconsin; many of the latter are members of the Teaching Assistants' Association, the oldest graduate employee union in the world, which played a key role in maintaining a continuous protest presence inside the capitol building. But participation in the protests extends far beyond the university. The largest rallies have drawn 100,000 people, more than earlier protests in Madison against the Vietnam War.[1]

Walker and his allies have framed his budget repair bill as an economizing measure needed to close the state's $137 million budget deficit. In fact, it is not so much an antispending as an antiunion bill. As the *Wisconsin State Journal* reported, the bill would "effectively kill" public employee unions in Wisconsin by severely curtailing collective bargaining for their members.[2] The bill completely eliminates collective bargaining for some categories of public employees (including faculty and graduate student employees), while for others it restricts bargaining to cost-of-living pay increases. Other provisions prohibit public-sector unions from collecting dues by means of payroll deductions and require annual certification elections for public-sector unions, which would now require the support of a majority of all bargaining unit members

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rather than a majority of those voting. In sum, Walker's budget repair bill would "impose a host of . . . measures that unions and labor experts said would cripple public unions and potentially render them useless."[3] While not directly affected by these measures, many private-sector trade unionists have come to the protests in Madison to stand in solidarity with public employees. They understand that labor's enemies, having decimated unions in the private sector (where only 6.9 percent of workers belong to unions), are now going after unions in the public sector (where thirty-six percent of workers belong to unions).[4] They understand that the right-wing agenda is to destroy what remains of the labor movement in the United States.

The governor's insistence that the state is broke and must therefore eviscerate the collective bargaining rights of public employees is both a non sequitur and a red herring. Union leaders offered to accept all of the economic concessions called for in the governor's budget repair bill, making it clear that crippling public-sector unions is not a means to balance the budget but an end in itself.[5] Indeed, Republican senators conceded as much when they eventually separated the bill's antiunion measures, which they could then pass without the quorum that Democrats had denied them, from the bill's fiscal provisions.[6] It is also clear that crippling public-sector unions and making deep cuts in public services are policy choices, not necessities. There are alternatives. For example, Marc Levine, director of the Center for Economic Development at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, recently pointed out that a temporary 1.5 percent income surcharge on the wealthiest one percent of Wisconsin taxpayers could "generate over $168 million, easily filling the $137 million budgetary gap that Walker claims can only be met by eliminating collective bargaining."[7] Finally, the fiscal crisis that Wisconsin Republicans are using as a pretext to destroy public-sector unions is at least partly of their own making. As Wisconsin's *Capital Times* noted, the state's budget imbalance was the result not of "increases in the cost of state employee contracts, benefits or pensions," but "$140 million in new spending for special-interest groups," which the legislature passed in January.[8] In addition, the legislature bestowed $117 million in new corporate tax breaks which, as the *Wisconsin State Journal* reported, "only deepen the state's fiscal woes."[9] Apparently, Republicans think Wisconsin can afford corporate tax breaks, which add to the state's budget deficit, but not spending for education, health care, and housing. Or, to put it differently, Wisconsin's current Republican leadership wants to pay for corporate tax breaks with draconian cuts to public services. This is income redistribution in the wrong direction. Ultimately, the assault on unions is not primarily about balancing the budget; it is about suppressing public employees' right to a voice in their workplaces and in politics.

Recognition that democracy is at stake in the struggles over public-sector unionism in Wisconsin and other states—for Walker's attacks on unions are part of a broader, coordinated campaign—is implicit in the protesters' chants of "this is what democracy looks like" and the comparisons made in the media and by protesters themselves between Egypt and Wisconsin. To be

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sure, the comparisons to Egypt are hyperbolic, as Alex Hanna has pointed out. Hanna, who is co-president of the teaching assistants' union at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a sociology graduate student with whom I have been privileged to work, personally experienced the protests in Cairo as a researcher and in Madison as a participant. Among other differences, he notes, there has been no violence in Madison, while hundreds died in the Egyptian protests.[10] Still, the invocations of Egypt contain a kernel of truth, for the assault on public-sector unionism, if it succeeds, will weaken and diminish American democracy.

For antilabor conservatives, such a statement must seem unfathomable. They have questioned the democratic legitimacy of the protests in Wisconsin, insisting that Walker and Republican legislators have a popular mandate, that Democrats in the state senate (who left the state to force Republicans to negotiate) acted illegally or abdicated their public responsibilities, and that the massive protests in Madison were an attempt at violent mob rule. In fact, polling shows broad public opposition to the governor's antiunion agenda in Wisconsin, belying claims of a mandate, and the protests in Madison have been overwhelmingly peaceful and orderly, with extremely few arrests.[11] A more fundamental problem with conservative claims is that they rest on a narrow and anemic conception of democracy. In contrast, a far more robust conception of democracy, inherited from the labor and civil rights movements of the past, is implicit in the protests in Wisconsin, one that includes "the right of the people peaceably to assemble, to consult for the common good, and to petition the government" (in the words of the state constitution), the right to recall elected officials, social movements, and even civil disobedience.

This expansive conception of democracy has an affinity with unionism. In the United States, as Clayton Sinyai has shown, labor unions have been, above all, schools of democracy.[12] Their flaws notwithstanding, labor unions are democratically organized institutions. Participation in them thus provides a valuable civic education for working people. Furthermore, labor unions aim, through collective bargaining, to create more democratic workplaces in which employees have some protection from the whims and arbitrary power of management and a say in the decisions that affect them. Lastly, unions give workers a democratic voice in government, helping to check the massive economic power of corporations—like that of the billionaire Koch brothers who support Walker—and their influence over public policy.

From this perspective, it becomes clear that the principal threat to democracy in Wisconsin and other states does not come from protests, unions, or the political opposition in the legislature. It comes from the right wing's own extremist assault on public-sector unionism and collective bargaining. Republican legislators, in their zeal to pass the governor's antiunion bill, severely restricted public access to Wisconsin's state capitol building, despite a judge's order to allow normal access, and they apparently violated Wisconsin's open meetings law, prompting another judge to temporarily block the antiunion bill from taking effect.[13] These affronts are hardly surprising, for the antiunion bill

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itself evinces a ruthless contempt for the democratic rights of others. In the words of a public statement signed by hundreds of University of Wisconsin faculty, "the right to form unions and bargain collectively has been essential to the establishment and enrichment of democracy in Wisconsin, in the United States and around the world." These rights have been affirmed by the International Labor Organization, which the United States joined in 1934; the 1935 Wagner Act, which encourages collective bargaining in private industry; the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which the United States endorsed in 1948; and the historic legislation in Wisconsin that extended these rights to public employees more than half a century ago. Stripping public employees of these rights denies them a democratic voice in their workplaces.[14]

In addition, the assault on public-sector unionism and collective bargaining aims to diminish the voice of working people in government. Crippling public employee unions would be a major setback for Wisconsin's Democratic Party because public employee unions are an important source of funding for the party.[15] Wisconsin State Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, speaking on Fox News, openly acknowledged this to be the aim of the legislation: "If we win this battle, and the money is not there under the auspices of the unions, certainly what you're going to find is President Obama is going to have a much difficult, much more difficult time getting elected and winning the state of Wisconsin [in 2012]."[16] The danger in these developments has been summed up by political commentator Rachel Maddow. "Without unions," she suggests, "essentially all of the big money in politics would be right-wing money."[17] Combined with other legislation, such as a voter ID bill (which would likely skew the electorate in Republicans' favor) and Republicans' currently untrammeled power to redraw the state's legislative districts and federal congressional districts to their own advantage, the assault on public-sector unions appears as one element in a larger strategy to maintain a conservative stranglehold on government. The governor's antiunion budget repair bill is thus less about money than power.

While the bill stripping Wisconsin public employees of collective bargaining rights has now been passed and signed into law, we are not going gentle into that good night. The labor movement and the Democratic state senators who stood with us delayed passage of the bill by three weeks, providing much-needed time to educate and mobilize the public against it. The law has been temporarily blocked in the courts, and the struggle is now shifting to recall campaigns against several of the Republican senators who voted for the law, eventually perhaps recall of the governor himself, and ultimately the 2012 election. (Readers can contribute financially to the Wisconsin recall efforts at https://secure.actblue.com/contribute/page/wiscrecall.) Perhaps, for an issue of *International Labor and Working-Class History* devoted to labor in the military, a veteran at one of the protests in Madison put it best: He said he had not fought for democratic rights overseas to have Governor Scott Walker take away his rights at home.

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NOTES

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rights which Madison did not envision, then this definition appears applicable to Wisconsin's current Republican leadership.

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