

Crunch Time for America's Public Sector Unions

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The media attack on public sector unions has reached a timely zenith, perfectly in sync with the politicians' anti-union deathblow. This coordinated campaign is happening nationwide, and includes Democratic and Republican marauders on a state-by-state basis. There are several state battlegrounds where this war is coming to completion, but no winner has been declared. If Democratic and Republican Governors are able to force massive concessions on public sector unions — and the corresponding cuts to services these employees deliver to the public — the labor movement and social safety net will both be decimated, paving the way for even more brutal, future attacks.

Take for instance Democratic governor Malloy of Connecticut. While bargaining a contract with state workers he wore a kind mask of “cooperation” and “respect” towards the unions. This led to an “historic” deal, where a Democratic Governor was able to convince labor leaders of the “necessity” to cut \$1.6 billion from employees wages and benefits. But rank-and-file workers disagreed and rejected the deal.

In response the Governor's mask was shed and brute force adopted. According to Reuters: “Malloy said he was moving “full steam ahead” with plans to lay off as many as 7,500 state employees...” (June 24th, 2011).

The battle isn't over yet. The parties are back at the bargaining table, but the threat remains imminent.

The exact same threat is present in New York, where a different Democratic Governor is using similar rhetoric. Labor leaders have recently accepted a tentative agreement for massive cutbacks for state workers, but the rank and file haven't ratified the deal. To ensure passage, Democratic Governor Cuomo is using Malloy-type threats. The New York Times reports:

“Mr. Cuomo's budget assumed \$450 million in savings from reduced labor costs [wages and benefits], and the governor had said that as many as 9,800 layoffs could be necessary if none of the state's public employee unions accepted wage freezes and other concessions.” (July 16th, 2011).

The Democrats in Massachusetts are even more brazenly anti-union, where Democratic Governor Deval Patrick assisted the Democrat-dominated legislature to pass bills restricting benefit bargaining by municipal employees.

In New Jersey, the Democrat-controlled legislature gave critical assistance to the anti-union Republican Governor, Chris Christie, in taking away bargaining rights for public workers over their medical and pension benefits. Massive cuts can now be imposed unilaterally. The New

Jersey Spotlight reported that the legislation would "...save the state \$132 billion over the next 30 years [in health and pension costs]." (June 29th, 2011). However, New Jersey unions are currently bargaining, and no cuts have yet been imposed.

In California, an all cuts budget was passed by Democratic Governor Jerry Brown, in which public education faces massive cuts. The two state university systems were each cut by half a billion dollars, which means faculty salaries will be reduced and the cost of what was public higher education is being shifted to the students in the form of higher tuition, meaning that these university systems are being increasingly privatized. Jerry Brown has also repeatedly stated that he will introduce pension "reform" for state workers. "Reform" is the common euphemism employed by politicians to refer to cuts.

In Oregon, Governor Kitzhaber, a Democrat, is attempting to force unprecedented cuts in health care to state workers, months after state workers campaigned to elect him. In return, the 51,000-member SEIU 503 is discussing the possibility of a statewide strike.

Many of the above attacks can be beaten back; there is still time. But only if an aggressive strategy is quickly adopted. Step one of such a strategy will require the above unions — and those in other states — to recognize that the Democrats are out for blood, and will use force if "friendly negotiations" fail. Force must be met with force. Concessions cannot satisfy the demands of the Democratic governors, who will be back next time for even more blood. Many of the above unions, who've conceded on health care in the past, are being asked for more concessions this time. The future will be no different.

Public sector unions must mobilize their members and the community they serve to fight back. They have no other choice if they are to remain powerful or even relevant. Making the above concessions without organizing a statewide fightback will demoralize the membership and thus substantially weaken the unions. A critically weakened union would then be open to future attacks that could potentially erase collective bargaining rights.

Wisconsin proved that the situation can be quickly changed, if unions mobilize their memberships in an aggressive fight. It is also crucially important that unions demand an alternative to the budget deficit crises. The banks, corporations and wealthy must be made to pay for the recession that they caused, especially in light of the growing inequalities in wealth where those at the top are monopolizing more and more of society's wealth in part by getting their taxes reduced. Without a demand to tax the rich and corporations, unions are made to accept the logic of the media and politicians: that states' deficits are due to the large pay and benefits of state workers. Demanding that the wealthy pay can quickly raise the necessary community support to win such a battle. Time is short.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2011/07/17/nyregion/to-save-jobs-union-approves-big-concessions-in-deal-with-cuomo.html?hp>

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/06/24/us-connecticut-unions-idUSTRE75N6KG20110624>

<http://www.njspotlight.com/stories/11/0629/0202/>

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