

The New Reality for U.S. Labor Unions

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The recent shakeup in Wisconsin is likely a preliminary tremor that predicts a larger earthquake. And like all natural disasters, the events in Wisconsin jolted people awake to grapple with their changed circumstances. Labor unions suddenly realized that their fate was hanging in the balance. After years of shrinking union power, Republicans seized the opportunity and planned a nationally coordinated attack, aiming at the very heart of labor unions: collective bargaining.

Years of think-tank pondering about beheading organized labor has jumped from the drawing board into practice. Unions managed to ignore the warning signs and were caught completely by surprise. Now, various labor unions are scrambling to respond to the attacks. Lacking, however, is a sobering assessment of how labor was weakened enough to be vulnerable to such an attack, as well as developing a winning strategy that can inspire workers to achieve victory.

Take for example a recent speech by AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka, entitled *The Future of Unions*. In his speech Trumka puts forth many good ideas which deserve attention, especially the need for international unions/solidarity; the need of more aggressive organizing; the need to do better outreach to the general public, etc.

But these ideas — however necessary — are insufficient to fight back against the immediate attack. In fact, Trumka skipped over any detailed analysis of the present battle that public-sector unions are fighting, limiting the topic to a few sentences on the importance of collective bargaining.

Unfortunately, Trumka trumpeted the “bright future” of U.S. labor unions while minimizing the severity of the current attacks. The harsh reality is that public-sector unions are the bedrock of labor’s power in the U.S., and they have been targeted for destruction, which, if successful, will leave the rest of labor unable to defend itself.

The future of unions cannot be unhinged from the outcome of the present battle taking place; a victory will push labor unions forward, a defeat will have debilitating consequences.

The crucial question that Trumka failed to ask is: how do we successfully defend public-sector unions? What strategies should labor employ to accomplish this? The rightwing has plotted and strategized for years on how to undermine these unions, but labor has not taken the same care to plan a counter strategy, responding to events with surprise and moral outrage instead of well-planned collective action.

The largely spontaneous actions of the Wisconsin workers inspired working people all over the country, containing valuable lessons on how to fight back against the anti-union attacks.

And while the fate of the Wisconsin struggle is not yet sealed, the strategy now being employed by Wisconsin labor has shriveled into the familiar realm of electoral politics; the same general strategy that labor has relied upon for the past 50 years, with horrendous results.

Why has the electoral strategy failed? For one, the fundamental difference between the powerful unions of yesterday and the passive unions of today is the unwillingness of today's unions to wage a real fight in the streets and workplaces. You cannot mobilize and excite workers with an electoral campaign for a Democratic party politician anymore; the betrayals of Obama put a nail in that coffin. And while it is true that the Republican Governor in Wisconsin may have temporarily revived illusions in Wisconsin Democrats, that fantasy will quickly fade.

In reality, the Democratic Party has ended their once-intimate relationship with labor, while some union officials seem in denial about the divorce. Instead of promising to help unions achieve their goals of better wages and benefits, the Democrats of today can only promise "not to attack collective bargaining." Sadly, some union leaders behave as if this promise equals friendship, even while these same Democrats are attacking the wages and benefits of public-sector unions; acting as the left-flank to the Republicans frontal assault.

For example, a Democratic Governor in Oregon — elected with strong union support — is now demanding that state workers take a 20 percent cut in compensation (!), an economic attack that goes deeper than the one of wicked Governor Walker of Wisconsin. Other Democratic Governors in other states — California, New York, etc. — are acting in a similar fashion. If enacted, these cuts will demoralize and disempower the workers, leading to a situation where the next Governor may "finish the job" by attacking collective bargaining rights.

The lessons of Wisconsin point to a different direction. Working people are inspired by independent, collective action. Massive demonstrations, the thousands occupying the state capital, and making solid demands — not compromises nor concessions — empowered people in Wisconsin. The San Francisco Labor Council used a similar formula in a recent resolution:

"The San Francisco Labor Council calls on the AFL-CIO and Change to Win to organize massive demonstrations in major cities across the country to demand that the federal government bail out the cash-strapped states through one or more of the following: a national mass public works program to put 27 million people back to work now; taxing Wall Street and raising taxes on the rich and on corporations; a major and systematic reduction in the Pentagon budget, with funds redirected to create jobs and meet human needs; and/or the repossession of improperly used federal bailout funds that are sitting idly in the Wall Street coffers."

Ideas like these will push the labor movement forward. The nice promises of Democrats cannot substitute for the power of working people in the streets. In Portland, Oregon, a coalition of labor unions and community groups have organized into a collective campaign called Portland Rising, and are planning a massive protest on April 16th for "Jobs, Not Cuts!" If demonstrations like this were organized all over the country working people would be invigorated.

Creating jobs and saving social programs like Social Security and Medicare — by taxing the rich and corporations — can mobilize the vast majority of working people. Voting for Democrats cannot.

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