



From the President

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People's protests in the Mideast and the Midwest: Back to the streets

As I write this column, protests have been ongoing for weeks over a Republican bill in Wisconsin that would strip most public-sector workers of collective bargaining rights, reduce municipal funding of pension and healthcare benefits and lessen oversight of state contracts with outside corporations.

Coming on the heels of the people's protests in the Mideast that shook the power structures in Libya, Tunisia and Bahrain and resulted in the fall of Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, commentators and journalists are turning their coverage to domestic protests against radical changes proposed by newly elected Republican governors and legislators.

These are Republican attacks on working people and especially on the unions that represent public sector employees. But, like the attacks on trial lawyers that were part of the so-called "tort reform" movement that began during the Bush Administration, there are two clear motives on the part of Conservatives.

Reward the rich, defund the Dems

The first is what New York Times columnist Frank Rich reported on February 27 when he wrote, "The real goal is to reward the G.O.P.'s wealthiest patrons by crippling what remains of organized labor, by wrecking the government agencies charged with regulating and policing corporations, and as always, by rewarding the wealthiest with more tax breaks."

The second motive is to de-fund the Democratic Party.

Do not think for one minute that ongoing Republican attacks on trial lawyers and the current assault on unions and working people aren't related. Both groups are strong financial supporters of Progressive politicians and both supply manpower to Democratic candidates.

In Wisconsin, and many other states, the mid-term election resulted in a super majority for Republicans in the legislature, leaving Democrats in the state Senate with no choice but to block the Governor's proposal by fleeing the state, thus preventing a quorum from assembling.

The ostensible justification for the Wisconsin bill was the state's large budget deficit and the supposed relatively lush benefits of municipal employees – teachers, prison guards, park rangers, and all but police and firefighters, in excess of those to private-sector workers. However, the real purpose of the bill is to gut the political force of the middle-class state workers. It is part of the GOP-led nationwide campaign to dismantle union power and solidify Republican control of the upper Midwest. Similar union busting efforts are underway in Ohio, Indiana and Pennsylvania.

Republicans now hold five of the seven Midwest governorships, [up from two last year], six of the seven lower legislative chambers [up from one last year] and five of the seven state senates. "Americans for Prosperity," a right-wing front organization, has a budget of \$40 million to fund alleged "grass-roots" campaigns like this in Wisconsin and 31 other states. In addition to breaking the unions, the group has the usual Republican agenda of opposing the health care law, limiting spending by government and gutting environmental regulation. Its biggest contributors by far are the billionaire Koch brothers. The Kochs were also one of the biggest contributors to the election campaign of Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker.

The reality of the public-private issue is far different than advertised. Studies by the Economic Policy Institute and others have shown that, when controlled for education, experience, ethnicity and so forth,

public sector workers earn less than comparable private sector ones. College-educated public workers are paid 25 percent less than those working in the private sector.

The proposed Wisconsin budget bill also has hidden in its 144 pages another power grab. It would allow officials appointed by the Governor to cut health care coverage for low income families without legislative approval, to sell any state-owned power plant or contract with a private entity to operate one without solicitation of bids or legislative approval, for any amount the official deems appropriate; by law such amount and such transaction would be deemed "in the public interest".

The cynical irony of foisting the deficit dilemma onto the backs of middle-class workers is that it was not the middle class that caused the problem. The right is trying to exploit the very crisis it helped create. Where is talk about Goldman Sachs, Citigroup, JPMorgan Chase, and the Greenspan Federal Reserve? Where is talk about the rising income inequality between the rich and the rest? Where is the talk about tax relief for the greedy, not the needy? Of decades of stagnant income growth of the middle class? Of the rising cost of housing, health care, fuel, education? Of more and more families living from paycheck to paycheck, stuck with worthless homes and mounting debts?

It is no wonder that support for the demonstrators has been coming from around the world. The arrogance of power resonates in Cairo, Tripoli, Bahrain. It may not be in the form of the Koch brothers' millions, but dreams can be deferred only so long. It is back to the streets.