

# The Middle West explodes - in the US

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**February 2011 has seen mass mobilisations of public sector workers sweep across much of America's Midwest, putting new ideas about class politics and power on the trade union agenda, argues Kim Moody.**

In Minnesota, Ohio, Indiana, Michigan and, above all, in Wisconsin, public employees demonstrated, called in 'sick', and stormed their respective state legislatures in opposition to proposed laws that would undermine basic union rights.

The laws were put forth by recently elected Republican governors in those and other states designed to destroy the power of public worker unions. The attack on public sector workers, often focused on teachers, is long standing, sponsored by big business and embraced by many Democrats as well as Republicans, from the Whitehouse to state legislatures and town halls across the country. The recent Great Recession provided a further opportunity for state governments facing growing deficits to propose the final coup de grace to public worker rights.

The first sign of worker resistance came on Monday, 14<sup>th</sup> February when some 400 Minnesota union members filled the hearing rooms of the state legislature to oppose a bill that would undermine union security and cut wages by 15 percent. The bill was withdrawn. Later that week, on Friday, 5,000 Ohio public workers stormed their state Capitol to stop similar legislation. Workers in Indiana and Michigan followed suit. The epicentre of this movement, however, was Wisconsin.

The explosion of worker mobilisation in Madison, Wisconsin began on 15<sup>th</sup> February when the state's three largest public employee unions called on members to demonstrate at the state Capitol against legislation proposed by the state's new Republican Governor, Scott Walker. Walker won the election in 2010 with Tea Party backing and funds generously supplied by the billionaire Koch brothers, who are also major funders of the Tea Party movement. In addition to the severe cuts in public jobs and services that have become the standard fare of state politics across the country, Walker proposed to limit collective bargaining to wages, end payroll deduction of dues, force public sector unions to vote every year for recognition, and impose higher employee contributions for pensions and healthcare, which, if the bill passes, cannot be negotiated.

The anger among public workers that generated this mass turnout has been a long time smouldering. Municipal employees in Madison, for example, had not had a wage increase in three years. Perhaps most aggrieved were teachers. All across the country they have been the target of educational 'reforms' that not only introduce scripted teaching and standard testing as the measure of all things, but specifically scapegoat teachers as the cause of America's slumping educational ratings. President Obama's 'Race to the Top' educational programme endorses this blame-the-teacher approach.

From Tuesday, 15<sup>th</sup> February, when about 10,000 answered their unions' call, the demonstrations escalated each day, reaching 70,000 on Saturday, 19<sup>th</sup> February. For two weeks, workers and students maintained a 24-hour occupation. Thousands remained encamped around the Capitol with

hundreds inside through the night during the entire second week. Although police and fire fighters were exempted from the law and private sector workers unaffected, the demonstrations saw fire fighters, 'cops for labor', steelworkers, building workers, and others in the crowd day after day. Fire fighters, at the behest of their union's leader, were among those occupying and sleeping in the Capitol. Also present in the streets were member of Iraq Veterans Against the War, one with a sign reading 'I left Iraq and came to Egypt.'

Wisconsin workers were reinforced as members of various unions came from around the Midwest in buses and car pools to show support. More recently, supporters have come from all around the country. People from around the world called in to a local pizzeria to order pizzas by the hundreds for the demonstrators. The rally on Saturday, 26<sup>th</sup> February drew well over 70,000 according to Madison police despite freezing weather and snow, while solidarity rallies, often numbering thousands, were held in all 50 states that same day.

Although the movement was called and backed by the union officialdom, much of the mass mobilisation was, as one reporter put it, 'spontaneous.' Another noted that the daily demonstrations, meetings, and overnight stays in the Capitol were organised by volunteers. Union branches in the area took turns joining the occupation. Union members in branches around the state took it upon themselves to organise their fellow workers into car pools. One group of 120 teachers from nearby Janesville answered their union's suggestion to call in sick and go to Madison. When the same union asked teachers to return to work, not all of them did. Indeed, while the word strike was seldom heard, 'sick-in' became part of the language of protest.

The movement was, by nature, political from the start. But it produced a rather unusual action by the Democrats in the state Senate. On Thursday, before the Republicans could bring the 500-page anti-union bill up for debate in the Senate, all 14 Democrats left the Capitol and then the state. Effort by Governor Walker to have the State Police hunt them down came to nothing as they escaped across the border to neighbouring Illinois. This deprived the Republicans of the quorum required to do business. It also made heroes of a group of politicians seldom engaged in risky actions. A week later Democrats in Indiana did the same thing.

In Wisconsin, one of the first to leave the Senate was, in fact, encouraged by militant demonstrators who sat down outside his office. The Democrats vowed not to return until the Governor was at least willing to negotiate on the specifically anti-union sections of the legislation. Republicans in the lower house, the Assembly, caught the Democrats sleeping and rammed through the bill at 1am on Friday, 25<sup>th</sup> — an act Democrats say is illegal. For the bill to become law it must still pass the Senate.

While many states face real budget problems those in Wisconsin were manufactured by Walker who cut business taxes, threw state funds at special interests, and turned a \$121 million budget surplus into a \$137 million deficit. Two-thirds of corporations in Wisconsin pay no taxes at all, according to the National Nurses United union. Ohio's budget 'crisis' was similarly produced by that state's new Republican governor. The right has attempted to intervene on the Governor's side in this class struggle, but efforts to turn out Tea Party counter-demonstrators have been completely eclipsed by the mass worker mobilisations. Indeed, three polls taken in the state during these events showed that over 60 percent opposed Walker's anti-union bill as too extreme, while the biggest and most recent saw 58 percent explicitly supporting the union side.

Up to this writing, the mobilisation has been officially supported by the state public employee unions and their top officials, but signs of wavering began to show even in the first week. As mentioned above, the leaders of the state's major teachers union, the Wisconsin Education Association called off the 'sick-in' they had initiated. The state-level officials of the three major unions also announced that they would accept the cuts in jobs and wages proposed in the legislation if the Governor would

withdraw the sections that attacked collective bargaining per se. Clearly, the officialdom saw the legislation as an attack on the very institutional basis of the union, something they had a deep interest in defending. So far they have not tried to call off the mobilisation.

On 22<sup>nd</sup> February, delegates to the Madison-based South Central Federation of Labour, which represents 45,000 workers in 97 affiliated branch unions, passed a resolution calling on affiliated unions to prepare and educate their members in the 'organisation and purpose' of a general strike if the law passes. There hasn't been a general strike in the US since 1946 when about seven cities saw such strikes. Whether or not this strike happens and whether or not the law finally passes, the massive upsurge in Wisconsin has put new ideas about class politics and power on the trade union agenda.

Well-known union organiser and expert Tom Juravich speculates that '20 years or so down the road we'll be talking about the 'before Wisconsin' and 'after Wisconsin' movements.'

**Kim Moody**

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\* From Counterfire:

<http://www.counterfire.org/index.php/articles/analysis/10658>

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