

Austerity and U.S. Decline

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THE FULL FRONTAL assault on public workers and their unions in one state after another — stripping collective bargaining rights and dues checkoff, slashing wages and pensions and health benefits, abolishing seniority and tenure for teachers, mandating yearly decertification votes, threatening jail terms for strikers — is as massive and instantaneous as it was unexpected by the labor bureaucracy and many union members. To say “the class war is back” is an understatement. It’s an authentic firestorm sucking the oxygen from labor rights, from Wisconsin to Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and other states.

In an act of symbolic vandalism, Maine’s governor proposes has removed the mural depicting the state’s labor history and will purge the name of Frances Perkins, Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal-era Secretary of Labor, from the state’s labor department building. In Wisconsin and Michigan, neo-McCarthyite rightwingers are demanding “Freedom of Information” mass disclosures of pro-labor university faculty’s email messages.

Some state struggles are covered in this issue of Against the Current, and Kim Moody’s essay “Wisconsin and Beyond” sets out the background. Even a brief summary is impossible to give here. In our home state of Michigan alone, 40 anti-labor laws have been enacted or are pending. Those already passed through the Republican-dominated legislature and signed by governor Rick “smart nerd” Snyder include “Emergency Manager” statutes giving state-appointed managers license to eliminate union contracts and even dissolve the elected governing bodies of financially distressed school districts and entire municipalities.

Republican domination of state legislatures also gives the right wing power over Congressional redistricting following the 2010 census, and control of the means of electoral fraud and vote suppression — a potentially critical factor in the 2012 elections, as illustrated by the events of Florida in 2000 and Ohio in 2004. In Wisconsin’s just-completed Supreme Court election, the post-count “discovery” of thousands of votes to overturn the result is a sign of what to expect.

The scale of the empowered right wing’s war on labor and the poor, always under the lying pretext that “the state is broke,” provokes several questions for consideration. We can’t necessarily give definitive answers, but we’ll offer some ideas in hopes of provoking discussion.

- Why are Republicans, when they achieve a majority, ready to move immediately on a tax-cutting, budget-slashing, labor-smashing agenda, whereas Democrats in power typically dither and dather and blither and blather until their momentum vanishes and their mandate runs out ?
- Will the rightwing assault smash through the opposition and permanently change the social and political landscape, or run aground on its internal contradictions and the mass outrage generated by its arrogant overreach ?

- Following the mass mobilization and occupation of the state capitol in Wisconsin and demonstrations in other states, can resistance actually turn back the attacks ?

Serving Their Masters

Let's look first at the behavior of the two parties. The Republicans on the whole serve a single master — corporate capital. In some cases, as in the notorious case of Wisconsin governor Walker, they even work directly for billionaire fractions of the ruling class like the infamous Koch brothers, cutting through the normal mediations and compromises of bourgeois politics. Union-busting legislation is literally drawn up in the offices of rightwing think tanks funded by these super-rich sponsors.

In any case, the program of cutting taxes for the affluent while slashing benefits and services for the population, eliminating union protection and business regulation, privatizing schools and hospitals and prisons and everything else up to and including Social Security — even if it's not only socially destructive but ruinously expensive to do so — fully responds to the wish list of corporate America.

Taken together, these measures will accelerate the already rapid social decline of the United States — a society that becomes poorer, more profoundly unequal, more insecure and repressive and a great deal less democratic — to say nothing of paving global civilization's road to irreversible environmental catastrophe. On the way to the bottom, however, the Republicans offer a wild ideological celebration of the return of the greatness of America to win the votes of millions of people whose jobs, pensions and kids' access to education are vanishing.

The Democrats, on the other hand, can only win politically by serving two masters, though by no means equally. The party's overriding loyalty is to corporate capital, especially its largest donors from Wall Street and the hedge funds — and to the capitalist system. The higher up the party leadership, the stronger the discipline imposed by capital. Yet the Democrats can succeed only by delivering benefits to their key voting base — labor, the African-American and other communities of color, women seeking gender equality and reproductive rights.

There are occasions, although much less frequent than during the height of the Civil Rights or antiwar struggles, when Democrats at lower levels act honorably, especially in response to the pressure of mass movements — and the fact that the destruction of public sector unions threatens the party's funding base. The 14 Wisconsin state Senate Democrats who left the state, blocking the quorum necessary to pass Governor Walker's union-smashing law, showed real courage and fighting spirit. (At the same time, the Democratic leadership was attempting to end the mass occupation of the Capitol.)

The record of the Democrats in power, however, is appalling and demoralizing to their support base — as the now well-known record of the Obama administration and Democratic-controlled Congress from 2008-10 illustrates. When it comes to broken promises, you only have to say "Guantanamo." But the biggest lessons about politics, of course, are EFCA — the Employee Free Choice Act, dumped in an unmarked grave without even a decent burial — and Health Care Reform.

The Republicans only had to respond to the wishes of the vampire health insurance industry, hence scream about "Obamacare" and invent lies about "death panels" to block meaningful discussion of the health care crisis in America. The Democrats, on the other hand, attempted to satisfy at the same time their voters' demand for health care and the demands of the insurance lobby. The result was the 2200-page bill that no one understands, which contains a number of absurdities unrelated to health care at all (like the incomprehensible requirement for businesses to file 1099 forms for almost

every vendor), and which the ascendant Republicans will work to defund so that most of its benefits never reach ordinary people who most need them.

In a period of capitalist decline and crisis — as opposed to the boom times of growth and prosperity — it's really true that "you can't serve two masters" with fundamentally opposed class interests, and so this is a game that Democrats will usually lose. But movements that attach themselves to the Democrats at such a time will always lose. Even while the intensity and pure viciousness of the rightwing assault on labor creates almost unbearable pressures to back the Democrats as "the only alternative," the real-life need for independent politics is greater than ever.

What Next for the Right Wing ?

The game-of-chicken over a government shutdown around the federal budget ended, for the moment, with a highly praised "bipartisan compromise" that hacks away billions from medical programs for children and the poor — those who need them most. It's a taste of what's to come in the next war over raising the federal debt ceiling.

Can the right wing sustain its momentum, or will it crash on its own overreach ? Backed by ideological centers like the Peterson Institute and Cato Institute, the right wing is preparing a frontal assault on Social Security, on the pretext that "the next generation can't afford the burden of Baby Boom retirees," that "only the truly poor really need Social Security" and all the rest of it. As we go to press Obama and the Democrats, again trying to serve two masters, are getting ready to offer "reforms" that will further weaken working people's confidence that Social Security will be there for them in the long run.

Social Security is neither in "crisis" nor the cause of the deficit. It has produced consistent surpluses for decades, which are used to subsidize U.S. capitalism's assorted wars, tax reductions for corporations and the rich, etc. Far from a "failed government program," it is the most successful one ever, and can be funded permanently by lifting the artificial ceiling on incomes taxed to finance it — which is precisely why it's now in the reactionaries' crosshairs.

The attack on Social Security is a quite deliberate, frontal assault on the notion that society's members bear any kind of collective, organized responsibility for each other. "Your Health Care, Your Problem" was a sign seen at Tea Party rallies trashing the health care reform. It's an ideology with some appeal to relatively better-off, mostly white working people — until the attack directly hits them.

Today's young workers are being told that today's retirees are enjoying generous benefits at their expense — but the right wingers don't mention that if Social Security is gutted, those same young workers who are struggling on inadequate wages will wind up bearing the whole burden of caring for their own aging parents.

The right wing offensive faces contradictions, however. The Republican sweep of the House of Representatives in November, 2010 occurred before the party was quite "ready for prime time." The Tea Party fringe, with its insistence on lunatic cuts that even the Republican leadership knows would be ruinous, presents a challenge to party discipline. Some of these same elements' fanatical commitment to cutting things like Planned Parenthood and public broadcasting — ideologically driven crusades which really have nothing to do with the budget at all — may generate a big public backlash.

The bigger contradiction is that the savagery of the state-level assaults on public sector workers has

stirred up, at long last, a massive labor response. Workers whose livelihoods and dignity are on the line, and union officials who see their organizations' financing about to be gutted with the abolition of dues checkoff, had no choice but to mobilize for their very survival. The Governor Walkers and their Crack Brothers backers who masterminded the assault didn't quite anticipate what they were unleashing.

Can the Resistance Win ?

The question remains, of course, whether this resistance can roll back the reactionary legislative tide. The fact is that the new laws are now on state statute books, aside from the legal challenge in Wisconsin over the blatant way the Republicans rammed it through. There are recall initiatives in Wisconsin and perhaps elsewhere against some of these legislators, and that's entirely to the good. It's still to be seen whether these recall drives can retain their momentum and unseat the reactionaries — and if they do, whether the next set of elected politicians will aggressively repeal the union-busting laws or set about “negotiating” over them.

Again, this attack demands radical, new independent politics, not a recycling of the same old lesser-evil corporate politics. But there's an even more immediate necessity — and a precondition for viable political action. Today's battle isn't one that the unions can win on their own, especially in the shriveled state of organized labor. A new, massive worker-led popular movement is the need of the hour.

Saving public education, for example, requires deeply rooted teacher-parent-community alliances ; it can't be done by the teacher unions alone. The “emergency managers” menace looming over Michigan municipalities and schools can only be defeated by full-scale community defiance and non-cooperation. Where public employees' strikes are met with firings and jail sentences, the entire labor movement and communities will need to rally behind them.

The stark reality is that the present political and legal climate — and the state of unions themselves in both public and private sectors — leaves workers with few effective tools to defeat the rightwing assault. New tools for resistance will have to be creatively forged in the midst of struggle itself, always a difficult problem. The first steps have been taken, however : Millions of people, including many who actually voted for these Republican governors, now see through the lying propaganda of the fanatical privateers and budget-slashing “free-market” fundamentalists. It's not just that class war is back — it's that more and more people can see and feel it.

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P.-S.

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