



Friday, December 31, 2010

## **Union should quit intimidating the public ... or pay the price**

**Gregg Walker**  
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Just when we thought the political agenda of Wisconsin's public employee unions could get no more self-centered, just when we thought that a union could not advertise its own disdain for the public interest while pursuing its own crass self-interest any more than it has, it did.

We thought we had seen it all, when state unions teamed with their defeated and disgraced Democratic allies and tried unsuccessfully to ram through new union contracts as the sun set on their glorious Almighty Big Government Empire.

But there they were, right here on the local level, the International Union of Operating Engineers, which represents the public works' employees of the town of Minocqua, filing a complaint against the town, accusing officials of trying to intimidate workers during collective bargaining for a new contract.

According to the complaint, outgoing town chairman Joe Handrick and supervisor Bryan Jennings made statements at town meetings - statements reported by The Lakeland Times - designed to "frustrate" the negotiations.

Those statements came as Handrick and Jennings addressed a proposed budget that, if approved by town electors and if the union did not modify its proposals, would likely require temporary layoffs or reduced work hours in a worst-case scenario.

These were factual assessments, given the proposed budget's no-wage-increase provision for town workers and given the union's demands, which, while not specified, obviously exceeded the proposed budget.

Town electors went ahead and approved the no-wage-increase budget, and so, the truth was, if the union stuck to its guns, something would have to give, namely, those reduced hours or temporary layoffs.

Such statements cannot be called intimidation. They are called being honest with the public - something union officials don't know too much about.

When you think about it, of course, the union isn't really accusing Mr. Handrick and Mr. Jennings; it is really accusing the aforementioned public. That public, through town electors, approved the budget before negotiations were complete; electors not only knew they were doing so but were aware of the ramifications.

The union's complaint is merely a condemnation of that vote, and an attempt to steal through litigation what it could not win through negotiation.

What the union is really trying to do is hold the town's budget hostage to its own greed; it seeks to void a public vote and replace it with the vote of the union politburo.

In this odd world view, citizens don't have a right to enact a pay freeze because it robs the union of flexibility in its negotiations, and town officials don't have a right to give honest information and assessments to its citizens.

In this bizarre way of thinking, public officials don't even have the same bargaining rights as private-sector employers, who routinely threaten during negotiations to move production elsewhere if they don't win concessions.

So just who is trying to intimidate whom?

Let's be straight about a couple of things. First, the workers filing this complaint are Cadillac workers with Cadillac wages and benefits, compared to the citizens who pay their bills.

Many of those citizens can't find a job at all. Many who are lucky enough to have jobs haven't had a pay raise in quite a while because of the economy, while town workers keep raking in automatic pay increases. Still others would love to have the benefits the workers of the town of Minocqua enjoy.

In addition to a standard 40-hour work week and robust wages, the town pays the employee's share of the retirement contribution to the State Retirement Fund, as well as 100 percent of the employees' health insurance premiums.

Good work if you can get it. In fact, very few workers in the private sector can match that kind of employer benefit contribution. Meanwhile, as the economy continues to struggle, as people continue to fight mightily to keep pace, the union continues not only to insist on increases but to scream that this endowment from financially strapped citizens is its inherent right.

Here's what's lost in all the union's hyperbole: Public employee union members are simply not the same as private-sector union members.

The truth is, there is nothing intrinsically good about a union. All unions represent private interests - the interests of their members. In the private sector, that means the private interests of a company's workers are set against the private interests of the company's owners and managers.

Sometimes the workers' private interests represent public interests, as they did in the 1930s. Because the union push enrolled millions of Americans in quest of what was then a living wage, a phalanx of private interests meshed into a public interest and helped produce the American middle class.

Those days are long gone. More often, in today's global economy, unions simply represent their own narrow interests.

And sometimes, as in the current economy and as with public sector unions such as the state unions and the local International Union of Operating Engineers, they represent a threat to the public interest of the community or communities they serve.

What's also lost in the union hyperbole is that, when public sector unions seek a new contract, they are not so much negotiating, as unions do in the private sector, but lobbying - that's what it is called when private interest groups seek public benefits.

Strip away the veil of legal formality, and we see they are lobbying not a town or a government or a group of individuals; they are lobbying the people. And the people have a right to say no, as they can do with all special-interest lobbyists.

That's exactly what the people of Minocqua did in their annual budget vote.

So how should the town respond?

Well, all of this has a corollary on the state level. Incoming Gov. Scott Walker has said he would consider decertifying state unions, which is not quite the accurate term. But the new governor could stop negotiating with them, which would constitute a de facto decertification.

He could do so by convincing the Legislature to change state law. While private sector unions are governed by federal law, public sector unions are governed by state labor law. The laws could be changed to strip public employee unions of their collective bargaining rights.

It would hardly be unprecedented. Both Indiana and Missouri have abolished public workers' bargaining rights, and, according to the Cato Institute, only 26 states have collective bargaining rights for all state and local public employees.

Perhaps it is time to consider that option in Wisconsin, and then perhaps it is time for the town of Minocqua to simply quit negotiating with selfish workers.

Many in Minocqua have argued for years that the town could use its resources more wisely and efficiently by contracting out most, if not all, of its public works' projects. Does a town our size really need a full-time department?

The bottom line is, when a special interest conflicts with the public interest, as it does here, the public interest must prevail.

The union complaint against the town is nothing less than a special interest attempt at intimidation, nothing less than civil thuggery.

The union should stop it, or pay the price.