
Features

Voices that won't be silenced...

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by Teresa Albano

Thousands of protesters have been pouring onto the streets in the US city of Madison, Wisconsin, and there's one thing they want everyone to know - the protests are about workers' freedom to organise into a union and bargain collectively.

These protests, they say, have nothing to do with "fixing" the Wisconsin state budget. Union leaders have called Republican Governor Scott Walker and told him they would accept his economic package if he dropped the ban on collective bargaining. He refused.

"We are willing to tighten our belts," said middle school band director Kim Hoffman, "but don't you dare take our rights away!"

Hoffman spoke at a rally last Friday in front of the state Capitol, saying she wanted to put a "human face" on what Walker is "taking away from the citizens of Wisconsin."

A 17-year veteran of the Army National Guard, Hoffman said her husband, also a teacher, and her three kids were there with her.

"I joined the army to pay for school. To be able to do one thing I dreamed of doing my whole life."

Hoffman's father is a retired band director too.

"This budget repair Bill will take away my dream," she said. "I am not here to arrest anyone here tonight. I'm not here to take the place of any correction officer. They are my union sisters and brothers," she said, referring to Walker's threat of calling out the National Guard.

Walker is in the pocket of the infamous Koch brothers, multibillionaire oil tycoons who support fringe far-right and racist causes like the John Birch Society which have moved into the supposed US mainstream through the Tea Party and Republicans.

"Koch-backed groups like Americans for Prosperity, the Cato Institute, the Competitive Enterprise Institute and the Reason Foundation have long taken a very antagonistic view toward public-sector unions," reports US news organisation Mother Jones.

"Several of these groups have urged the eradication of these unions. The Kochs also invited Mark Mix, president of the National Right to Work Legal Defence Foundation, an anti-union outfit, to a June 2010 confab in Aspen, Colorado."

Americans for Prosperity, a Koch Brothers front, has put up a website called Stand With Walker.

The website is so extreme it attacks all collective bargaining - not just for public employees' unions.

Americans for Prosperity was behind a Tea Party rally in Madison on Saturday, which drew a pathetically small crowd compared with the tens of thousands of union workers, students and supporters.

The Koch brothers have big financial interests in Wisconsin.

According to liberal blog Think Progress, "Koch owns a coal company subsidiary with facilities in Green Bay, Manitowoc, Ashland and Sheboygan; six timber plants throughout the state; and a large network of pipelines in Wisconsin.

"While Koch controls much of the infrastructure in the state, they have laid off workers to boost profits. At a time when Koch Industries owners David and Charles Koch awarded themselves an extra \$11 billion of income from the company, Koch slashed jobs at their Green Bay plant."

Even the New York Times, not a friend of unions and working people, said in its February 17 editorial that Walker's budget plan had "an ideological goal dear to his fellow Republicans - eliminating most collective bargaining rights for public employees" - that has nothing to do with allegedly fixing the budget.

Reverend Jesse Jackson said at Friday night's rally that Wisconsin workers and students are "winning the Super Bowl of workers' rights."

He called it a Martin Luther King Jr and Gandhi moment, referring to the non-violent nature of the Wisconsin protests, and linking it to the peaceful Egyptian protesters who overthrew their dictator Hosni Mubarak.

"You have captured the integrity of the nation" like the civil rights marchers did in Alabama.

"Workers have the right to be at the table," he said to the roar of the crowd. "Today it is Wisconsin, next week it is Ohio. We have a great president, but he cannot do it alone. When we don't fight back it weakens him. When we fight back, we win!"

"This is a Martin Luther King Jr moment. This is a Gandhi moment. Don't submit to hate. Say No to violence. Say No to racism. Don't let them break your spirit. Don't submit to homophobia. This land is your land, it was made for you and me," he said.

Then, taking on the ideological thrust of the attack, Jackson said: "America was a liberal idea. 'Give us your poor and huddled masses yearning to be free' was a liberal idea. You are not the reason why banks collapsed. You are not the cause, you are the solution."

He then led the audience in prayer and a rousing rendition of We Shall Overcome.

Public employee union AFSCME announced its willingness "to accept economic concessions called for in Governor Walker's budget repair Bill, including pension and health-care concessions."

But, it said, it is "not willing to give up [our] fundamental right to have a place at the bargaining table or to let the governor throw out the table.

"State and local public employees are making clear, as they have all along, that they are willing to find a sensible budget solution. But they will not compromise on protecting the rights of nurses, teachers ... and other public employees to have a voice."

The protesters are not just union members but their families, school and college students, professionals, retirees and small business owners. The Democrats in the state senate and house are all fighting on the legislative front.

The Democratic state senators have left Wisconsin and have given the "ultimate sacrifice" by going to Illinois in an effort to stall the effort by the governor and Republican lawmakers to ram through the proposal.

The President of the United States has expressed support. And there have been smaller solidarity rallies across the state from Racine to Green Bay.

Players from the Super Bowl champion Green Bay Packers have issued statements in support of teachers and other public employees. Madison-area local businesses have offered discounted food, cab rides and hotel rooms for protesters.

Solidarity has extended beyond Wisconsin's borders. One local pizza restaurant had to suspend taking local orders because it had its hands full processing out-of-state orders donated to the protesters.

"By our (rather harried) count, we've heard from 30 states and five countries (including Egypt, Korea, and our northern friends, Canada...). Wow," said Ian's Pizza on its Facebook page. "To our regular customers: We really apologise, but... wow."

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