

InnovationENTREPRENEURSHIP FOR A DISRUPTIVE
MARCH 23 -24, 2011
HAAS SCHOOL OF BUSINESSREGARDLESS OF THE INDUSTRY,
AN ORGANISATION LIVES OR DIES
BY HOW IT **INNOVATES**The
Economist

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The group blog of The American Prospect

Organizing Is a Right, Not a Privilege.

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BY **MONICA POTTS** | POSTED **02/21/2011 AT 01:12 PM**

I **was listening** to the **Diane Rehm** show on my way into the office, and Chris Edwards, director of tax policy studies at the Cato Institute was a guest in the show's discussion of the Wisconsin protests and the policies that spurred Gov. **Scott Walker** to introduce a draconian bill that would end the state's public-sector workers' rights to organize. Edwards kept pointing to the fact that many states, such as Virginia and North Carolina, don't allow their public-sector workers to unionize and used it as a cudgel to argue that unions have destroyed manufacturing in America, that states without unionized public sectors are more solvent, and, most important, that organizing is a privilege, not a right.

This is just one example of a broader tendency to let some states with regressive, conservative policies -- namely states in the South -- set the terms of the debate nationally. The absence of public-sector unions in states across the old Confederacy doesn't mean the unions are special cases that throw inefficient wrenches into the market system. The existence in many states of anti-gay-marriage amendments doesn't make the right to marry any less a right; it just means there are huge populations whose rights are violated and that those violations are enshrined in law.

So too are workers rights' violated across the South. The motivations behind anti-union policies have much more to do with racism and antipathy to the poor than they do with fealty to market forces. That in and of itself would be reason enough to resist the sort of anti-union sentiment in states like Virginia, but there are other reasons, of course, too.

Kevin Drum **pointed** to the biggest one today:

But the decline of unions over the past few decades has left corporations and the rich with essentially no powerful opposition. No matter what doubts you might have about unions and their role in the economy, never forget that destroying them destroys the only real organized check on the power of the business community in America. If the last 30 years haven't made that clear, I don't know what will.

My job at the *Prospect* is the first non-unionized job I've had as an adult. Most of the time, I didn't think a lot about the benefits my union membership got me, and I was a member of a union as a city employee in New York City that was always in the news because its officials were doing corrupt things. I didn't really fully understand the point of unions until I worked for a particularly hostile newspaper company. While I was there, our wages

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froze, our benefits were reduced, our holidays cut in half and our contributions to our health insurance premiums rose to half the overall price -- saddling us with an almost \$3,000 yearly bill and effectively reducing our salaries by that much. Seemingly little things pecked away at us, too: our mileage rate was reduced right at the time that we moved to offices further from the center of town and we had to drive a mile out of the way because the entrance to the office park nearest our unit was under construction.

At the same time, our staff was slashed and we all had to do more work, under an editor overwhelmed and, frankly, unqualified for the elevated position in which he found himself. If we weren't already unionized, we would have unionized then. The decisions that led to the newspaper's dire financial straits -- an early reluctance to understand the Web, an over-investment in infrastructure, a bad deal that left the parent company bankrupt -- had nothing to do with the workers, who, frankly, hadn't been born when those decisions were made. We worked longer hours and performed more diverse tasks than ever. In short, we'd kept up our end of the bargain, and the company that employed us had shirked its responsibilities. Meanwhile, those at the top of the hierarchy, who still didn't understand the Web as well as we did, remained very well compensated.


The union was the only way we could all push back against some of these changes, all of which reduced morale and made the best employees jump ship. Because our paper was consolidated with others, the power of the union to bargain was reduced. None of these things makes for a better paper, a better company, or a better country. What's so infuriating about Walker's moves are how counterproductive they are. It doesn't take much to treat employees well, whether you're a state or a company, and it doesn't take much for the balance of power to tip too far and lead to employees being treated badly. It's heartening to see how strong the protests remain -- not because unions are always in the right, but because, without them, there would be no checks on a governor who cares more about his ideology than he does about the true fiscal health of the state.

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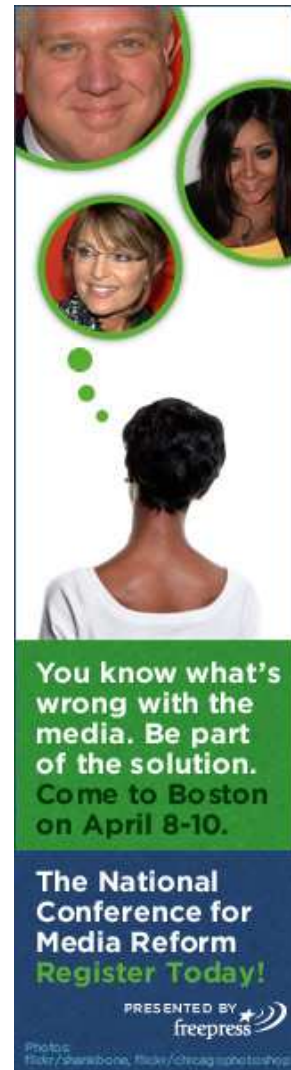
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 **Campesino**


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So public employee unions are a check on evil democratically elected state and local governments?

19 hours ago 2 Likes

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biggofer

Organizing against autocratic industrialists in the past made sense.

Organizing against own Government, a democratically elected one? Why?

Government is supposed to collect - via taxes and fees - only enough money from its citizen to run the essential services.

Collective bargaining against a Government is nothing but the tax extortion from the rest of the private citizen for the benefits of only few who work for the Government.

10 hours ago 1 Like

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INTJ

Public workers have no more "right to organize" than do any other groups of citizens. They are not attempting to force a private company to share the profits, they are attempting to effect via "bargaining" what they could not otherwise accomplish through the democratic process. Your comparison to a newspaper company is therefore completely nonsensical, since it in no way involves public servants.

And FYI, I, too, worked for a company whom I considered unfair, as well. Raises were few, far between, and tiny. Benefits were bare. My solution? I went and got another job. Now that old employer is out of business, at least in part because it could not retain quality employees. Government workers want to have salaries on a par with and benefits better than private workers, retirement and health plans that require little or no input on their part, and the ability to go on strike and blackmail the taxpayers if they feel any of that is threatened.

Beans to that.

19 hours ago 1 Like

Like Reply

ddrew2u

One stat tracks the disappearance of America's -- collectively bargaining -- middle class:

US median wage (the average person's) wage, 1968: \$12.50/hr

US median wage (the average person's) wage, 2008: \$15.00/hr

<http://www.stateofworkingameri...>

During the same span average income doubled from \$14,000/yr to \$28,000/yr!

<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www...>

The federal minimum wage is now \$3/hr below what it was in 1968:

The advertisement is a vertical banner. At the top, it says "DRIVERS 50+" in large white letters on a blue background. Below that, it says "COULD SAVE \$384* ON AUTO INSURANCE RATES" in smaller white text. A yellow button with black text says "Request Free Quote". Below the button, the AARP logo is shown in red, followed by "Auto Insurance Program from THE HARTFORD" in black text. At the bottom of the ad is a photograph of a smiling man with short grey hair, wearing a light blue shirt and a seatbelt, sitting in the driver's seat of a car.

Federal minimum wage 1968: (\$1.60/hr nominally) \$10.15/hr

Federal Minimum wage, 2011: \$7.25/hr

<http://www.minneapolisfed.org/>

Doubling the federal minimum wage might add only 3% to the cost of living -- that is how little money goes to the bottom.

Doubling the federal minimum wage (to today's median wage) would add how much to the price of housing, health care, transportation, clothing, electronics? A Big Mac could go up 33% (fast food being by far the biggest labor user) -- but half the country would get a raise!

I worked out 2% inflation from \$7.25 to \$\$12.50 here: <http://ontodayspagelinks.blogspot.com/>

Today America is being fought over by two elites. The liberal elite wants to tear up the social fabric (TSA invasiveness) while the conservative elite wants to tear up the economy (tax cuts for the rich-to-deregulated banks-to-borrowers who can't pay back). When I was a kid (67 years old now) the liberals healed the social fabric while the conservatives guarded the economy.

When I was a kid the average person still counted because unions gave us economic and political leverage: as much organization as any special interest and the majority of votes.

This is not the time for Wisconsin to disband the last bastion of American labor, government unions.

26 minutes ago

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arbitrista

To reply to the commenters, it should be noted that the managers of public sector organizations have just as much an incentive to mistreat their workers and pay them as little as possible as managers of private sector ones. The fundamental dynamics are the same, and therefore the need for the unions is the same as well.

36 minutes ago

[Like](#) [Reply](#)

Theobnoxiousamerican

Glad to see so many already respond to this non-sensical article by Potts. Of course she worked for the NYC government. Only someone who has worked (and I use that term extremely lightly) in the boondoggle that is NYC government would hold such an absurd view.

A few facts to correct in this article:

Gov Walker won't "end the state's public-sector workers' rights to organize". Instead he is proposing an end to collective bargaining for BENEFITS only. Salary would still be collectively bargained. Further, this would give gov employees a choice as to whether to pay union dues. Perhaps Potts views this as an "end" of organizing because she knows if given the option (which gov employees don't currently have) to opt out of dues, they would and this would thus "end organization."

Further, the use of the terms, regressive, conservative, south, and "confederacy" in an article about Wisconsin unions shows the extreme bias of the author and serve only to paint all with a right or center right view with the same broad brush. And I thought the dems were supposed to be big tent.

AP - I've come to expect dribble from you, but this is just drool.

50 minutes ago

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lillianquon

People should never forget that real health depends how well you take care of yourself and not what health insurance you carry but I agree health insurance is important for every one. Search "Wise Health Insurance" online for dollar a day insurance plans.

9 hours ago

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