

What does the Madison catfight mean for teachers?

By Jim Stergios

February 21st, 2011

The public debate in Wisconsin over the effort by Governor Scott Walker to curtail collective bargaining rights for public employees has all the stuff of a great teaching moment. It has the governor of a state that is known for and has a long history of progressivism. The president of the United States has lined up against the governor. Thousands of workers are swarming into the State House, and legislators exiting across state lines.

The story also has the benefit of being about something we all understand—we are broke. We're broke as states and a nation, and how are we going to work through this. The story has the added benefit of being something familiar to all of us: We have all known that we are facing a train wreck of benefits and public sector salaries versus what we are willing to pay in taxes was going to heading right our way.

The debate in Wisconsin is crucial to get right, because it is going to frame the debate in other states; as a result, if the train goes off the rails, it will be a wreck. If we get a sense of settlement in Wisconsin, there is a good chance that the train comes into the station.

Of course, one of the mainstays of the labor movement in Wisconsin, as elsewhere in the United States, are the teachers unions. Taking into consideration the non-fiscal/financial aspects of the Wisconsin debate makes the story even more interesting: As states across the country consider alterations to how we evaluate and provide incentives to teachers, this fight over certain collective bargaining rights is really important. And in this regard, [Andy Rotherham](#) makes a strong point in [Time](#) magazine about the difference in what collective bargaining means for teachers as opposed to, say, steelworkers:

We keep hearing how there isn't any difference between collective bargaining for steelworkers or autoworkers and bargaining for public-sector workers like teachers. Not exactly. While steelworkers can't pick the boards of directors for steel companies, teachers' unions have enormous influence in elections for school board members and state legislators. And while car and steel factories can go bankrupt — providing a real check on what kinds of demands labor can make — there is not the same constraint in the public sector, because while states can go broke, they can't go out of business. Given this, are any restraints on public-sector collective bargaining appropriate?

There are [important distinctions to be made between industrial labor union contracts and those that are suited to professionals such as teachers](#). And the issue is especially important in our larger city districts, where the industrial-style teacher contract dominates.

Here's what the media is getting right about the story. The changes called for by Governor Scott Walker are significant. [The conservative blog Red State](#) highlights the key changes as being that Gov. Scott Walker is "planning to strip" some public sector unions (not including public safety) "of some of their collective bargaining rights". Which ones is important to underscore:

- Collective bargaining to only be allowed for base pay.
- Union dues not to be collected by the state.
- Annual Secret ballots to keep unions certified.
- UNION DUES TO BECOME VOLUNTARY.

This raises one misconception occurring in the media, which is that the governor is seeking to end all collective bargaining rights. But the changes are tantamount to a sea-change for educators in Wisconsin. For example, while base salary would be negotiated collectively, so-called "step" increases, uniform increases in salary based on tenure, would end. Also, the ability of teachers to select their own classes and schools based on seniority would end. A final example is that, prospectively, as school managers seek to establish evaluation and incentive systems, they would, while working with teachers, not have contract negotiations holding their feet to the fire or holding them hostage (depending on your view of the matter).

Another misconception is that the changes Scott and the Wisconsin Republicans are seeking are an absolute outlier position on the larger national stage. Some critics, such as [Chris Edwards of the CATO Institute](#), say that Walker needs to go further and end all collective bargaining rights for public employees (including public safety and including all matters related to salary).

Unions certainly have free speech rights to voice their opinions about public policy. But collective bargaining gives unions the exclusive right to speak for covered workers, many of whom may disagree with the views of the monopoly union...

Whatever your view of Edwards' position, he is right to remind us that

In states such as Virginia, teachers and other government workers may form voluntary associations and lobby the government, which is fine. But collective bargaining — or monopoly unionism — gives a privileged position in our democracy to government insiders who focus on expanding the public sector to own their personal benefit.

Wisconsin's proposed union reforms are on the right track. But state governments should repeal collective bargaining in the public sector altogether, following the successful policies of Virginia, North Carolina, and other states. That would give policymakers the flexibility they need to make tough budget decisions on pensions and other fiscal challenges facing their states.

Make no mistake about it: Governors all over the country are watching this Wisconsin catfight closely. [As Blue Cheddar](#), a progressive blog in Wisconsin, notes, Ohio

Governor John Kasich has already begin advancing a very similar piece of legislation in Ohio.

Ohio's Senate Bill 5, if passed would-

- Wipe out, or severely limit, collective bargaining for all state workers – including unionized faculty and staff at Ohio colleges and community colleges.
- Ban public employee strikes.
- Weaken binding arbitration for police and firefighters who cannot strike.
- Limit a local union's right to bargain for health insurance.
- Eliminate automatic pay increases for public employees.
- Strip teachers of the right to pick their classes or schools.

Governors like Chris Christie of New Jersey have explicitly noted about the battles with teachers unions that “this is the fight.” Going forward over the next few weeks, we will see all kinds of resources poured into Madison on both sides of the issue. Much has been made of rhetoric over the past year, mainly noting the forces on the right have been guilty of overstepping the bounds of propriety.

Advice to all sides: This may be a Wisconsin issue... for now. But we are all watching.

The following video was taken by the Wisconsin Republican Party so take it with a grain of salt. But however much salt you pour on it, there is a lot of meat for those who would say that the protesters so far have not behaved well at all.