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Organizing Is a Right, Not a Privilege.

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 oppose 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, we 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 of 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 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 office 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, unequal to 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

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.