

# The Fight in Wisconsin

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In some respects, the biggest surprise about Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's efforts to take away public employee unions' right to bargain collectively is why it took so long. Public employee unions are an understandably irresistible target to right wing Republicans. Public employee unions work for the government which, in Republican minds, is already one strike against them. They also reflect efforts by ordinary people to succeed not through feats of individualism, but through working together and cooperating, which, inevitably, feels too close to socialism for most Republicans. Lastly, in many places, although not Wisconsin, public employee unions are heavily non-weight, so consist of people that would be unlikely to vote for the Republican Party anyway.

For at least the last three decades, part of the Republican message has been that unions are corrupt, inefficient, destroying the American economy and probably anti-American. Budget problems in cities and states, as well as increased competition from other countries, for example, are invariably blamed on labor unions by conservative propagandists. Similarly, the teachers unions have become, in the eyes of the right wing, the party responsible for problems facing education in the US. There are almost no limits to efforts, often absurd ones, made to portray unions as evil. Recently the decision by St. Louis Cardinals star Albert Pujols to turn down his team's lucrative contract offer in hope of landing a bigger contract in the off-season [was blamed on pressure from the players union](#).

The result of putting millions of dollars behind this message is that unions have grown weaker as membership has generally decreased over the years and fewer non-union members feel positively disposed towards unions. Many Americans are convinced that labor leaders are greedy, corrupt, selfish and care little for the good of the country as a whole. Of course, these descriptions are at least as pertinent to much of the leadership of the financial and business sectors, and many of our politicians, as has been made clear during the last few years. On the other hand, the critical role labor unions have played in the expansion of basic economic rights not just to their members, but to the society more broadly, and the extent to which they are integral to preserving these endangered rights for future generations, on the other hand, is barely known at all by many Americans.

There are, of course, some concerns about public sector unions which should be taken seriously. There is something of a closed loop relationship between public sector unions, the largely, but far from exclusively, Democratic officials they support, and the subsequent negotiation of contracts. In many states and cities public sector unions are going to have to make some sacrifices due to budget crunches, but the union leadership

has been willing to negotiate on these kinds of things. On the other hand, some of these concerns are nonsensical. The common Republican canard, for example, that public employee members get paid better and have better pensions than many workers in the private sector, speaks more to the problems of how we treat private sector workers than to any problem involving public sector unions.

The effort to take away the right of public sector unions to bargain collectively, which is now occurring in Wisconsin, grows very naturally out of Republican rhetoric regarding unions, the market and the economy from the last several decades. It also has very little to do with the budget problems facing Wisconsin, as Walker has made it clear that [his anti-union policies are not negotiable](#) and that he will not back down on this point even if he gets the concession he wants from the unions.

If Walker wins this fight in Wisconsin, it is almost certain that some of 36 other states which currently allow collective bargaining for public sector workers will try to follow suit and restrict collective bargaining for public employee unions. This fight will also probably continue to the national level. It is not clear which side will win this fight, but it is very likely that an anti-union victory in a northern industrial and somewhat liberal state like Wisconsin will set an important precedent for the whole country. Significantly, if public employee unions are weakened, the blow will be felt throughout the labor movement. This point is obviously not lost on conservative strategists and their wealthy supporters for whom weakening the labor movement and further eroding the rights of all American workers remains a top priority.

Unions might be the immediate target of Walker and the Republicans, but the overall goal is far broader. By weakening the one kind of organization that has effectively represented the interests of working Americans, not just through collective bargaining but through supporting and advocating for progressive legislation that helps almost all Americans, the Republican Party will make it far more difficult for any future progressive to win election or pass meaningful legislation.