MAKING HISTORY IN THE HEARTLAND:
Wisconsin Workers Stand Up for the Middle Class

The state capitol in Madison, Wisconsin served as the backdrop for one of the largest labor protests in U.S. history this past February, despite the sparse national media coverage and political outcry it should have received for its sheer size and scope.

Nearly a half of a million teachers, fire fighters, nurses, high school and college students and union supporters overwhelmed the city for several weeks on end to protest Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker’s attack on public sector bargaining rights.

Chanting “This is what democracy looks like,” the massive crowd of workers refused to be bullied by a governor fixated on destroying union jobs and the middle class.

Governor Walker had originally proposed a state budget bill asking public sector workers to accept major concessions and pay more into their health care and pension plans. Despite Governor Walker piling on the deficit with last minute corporate tax breaks and despite the state workers already sacrificing 16 unpaid furlough days that saved Wisconsin taxpayers $100 million dollars, the teachers and other public sector workers all agreed to the additional demands.

However, the governor’s budget bill was never about the money. Governor Walker announced that he was not interested in bargaining with the state workers and instead wanted to eliminate their union bargaining rights once and for all.

He was even caught “red handed” on a recent reporter phone call stating this fact and showing his true colors that he was being manipulated by the billionaire Koch brothers, who financed “anti-worker” attacks across the country and who could financially gain from the passage of the bill.

Downplaying this seemingly damaging evidence, Governor Walker refused to budge. He firmly believed that with a Republican controlled House and Senate and his eyes focused on gaining national recognition, he could still ram this bill through the state.

What he didn’t foresee was an unprecedented backlash from the workers of Wisconsin—74% of union and non-union workers against the bill. He also didn’t count on fourteen Democratic Senators who heroically fled the state to filibuster the bill and expose the governor’s unwillingness to negotiate with them or the workers—a fact also revealed on the reporter’s phone call to Governor Walker. And he didn’t count on millions of workers who were upset with their own state politicians lining up to destroy public and private sector employees.

What’s really at stake in the Wisconsin battle is much more than the public worker’s bargaining rights. If those rights are taken away, it opens the flood gates for Republican controlled states like Indiana, Ohio, Florida and New Jersey to enact “Right to Work for Less” laws that will destroy private sector unions.

Once these politicians can whittle down union membership to single digits, their corporate allies will virtually control the political process through their unmatched and unchecked campaign contributions. Democracy will – in essence – be sold out to the highest bidder.

One of the most profound speeches made by a member of the United Steelworkers of America at the Wisconsin rallies summed up this fight at its core. “If we (working people) stand up for our basic worker’s rights as we are doing so right now, I can not guarantee that we will win this fight. But if we don’t stand up in solidarity at this moment, I can guarantee that we will lose them forever.”

At press time, eighteen Wisconsin Republican Senators passed a bill—not tied to the budget and in violation of the public meetings law—stripping public workers of their collective bargaining rights. This blatant attack on union members was signed just days later by Governor Walker into law. However, the fight for the middle class is hardly over in Wisconsin. Workers across the state are successfully ramping up their efforts to recall many of the Republican legislators and Governor Walker, and legal recourse is already underway to reverse the decision.

To find out the latest happenings in Wisconsin and across the country where good jobs are under assault, visit www.voteufcw.org.