

Colin Christiansen

In early 2011 the State Governor of Wisconsin, Republican Scott Walker, proposed a bill which would take away collective bargaining rights of over 170 000 public sector employees. An unprecedented reaction followed, with crowds of people traveling to Madison, Wisconsin to protest. Governor Walker had created the bill to “repair the budget” of Wisconsin. It would eliminate the collective bargaining rights of public workers as well as increase their payments towards their pension plans and healthcare premiums. The objective of the bill was to balance the deficit of the Wisconsin state budget. The bill was turned down because it violated Wisconsin’s open meeting law, which requires ample time and public access to the bill passing process.

A case such as this seems relatively far from home, not only because of the physical distance, but because the logistics of the American legal and political systems are slightly different from Canada’s. But what happened in Wisconsin should have Canadians taking note. Because of the great interconnections between the two countries, there is the potential for something similar to what happened in Wisconsin to occur somewhere in Canada. If Republican governors across the United States keep pressing for these “budget repairs”, there could most definitely be a similar effect in Canada. The middle class working families in Canada would likely be the most harmed with the passing of an anti union bill, as they are the demographic most involved with, and who benefit the most from the actions of unions, such as the AUPE in Alberta. Simple things which we as Canadians take for granted, such as having the garbage taken away, or having a teacher in the class room, would all of a sudden be in jeopardy if anti union acts continue and spread into Canada. It is the unions like AUPE which provide support and a voice to groups such as teachers, nurses, and peace officers. They also help to instill a sense of democracy and balance in world dominated by big business and politics. When AUPE Vice-President Glen Scott visited the Madison, Wisconsin protesters, he stated that the middle class public workers “..are the people who actually do all the work.” (<http://www.aupe.org/wisconsin-crisis/word-madison/>). The workers of the public sector provide essential services to all Canadians, and are a large part of making Canada such a great country. This provides an excellent reason as to why, if there was ever something to happen to the union members, there would be immediate problems with the infrastructure of the province or country.

The case should also matter to middle class Canadians and to the AUPE, because of the incredible reaction against the bill. As mentioned earlier, people from all walks of life came to support the public workers of Wisconsin. Many of the people who came out weren’t even from Wisconsin; they just came to defend the rights and voice of their fellow Americans. People came to support not only the union members, but the idea of democracy as a whole. Middle class Canadians and the AUPE should look at this and know that if there was the potential for an anti union bill, Canadians would most likely step up and together to fight it.