

Wisconsin Republican State Governor Scott Walker's "anti-union" bill, which will effectively eliminate collective bargaining rights for most public sector employees, matters greatly to the middle class working families here in Canada and to AUPE for a number of reasons. In Alberta, as in the United States, unionized middle-class employees have the right to collective bargaining with their employers, the objective of which is a collective agreement between the union and the employer. The agreement governs wages and benefits for the employees it covers, for a fixed period of time. There is a cycle to collective bargaining, with particular steps and rules to be adhered to along the way. On February 11, 2011, Wisconsin's Republican Governor Scott Walker unveiled a "budget repair bill" that would make it illegal for employees to negotiate working conditions, benefits, or job protection. They would be allowed to discuss wages, but it would be so restricted that it wouldn't really be bargaining. Employer's pension and health benefit contributions would be cut off the top. Walker claimed these drastic measures were necessary to reduce Wisconsin's \$3.6 billion deficit over the next two years<sup>1</sup>.

The attack on the middle-class in the United States has serious potential to spill across the border and do much harm to working families here in Canada too. Budget shortfalls of states and provinces are not the result of public employee wages and benefits, but from mismanagement at the boardroom table. Yet ordinary working families are paying for the mistakes of big business and big banks. The Wisconsin crisis matters to AUPE members because this type of thinking is already spreading to other states and there are calls for similar attacks on the public service here in Canada. With politicians in Alberta bent on privatizing public services, it's only a matter of time before someone tries to eliminate the provincial deficit in a similar manner<sup>2</sup>. What ends up happening in Wisconsin has national implications, and AUPE believes that the Alberta government will want to emulate Governor Walker. Most recently, AUPE President Guy Smith condemned the federal legislation which undermined Canada Post employees' collective bargaining rights. "Collective bargaining is a fundamental, democratic right that has evolved over more than one hundred years to balance the power of employees and their employers," Smith said. "Legislation that takes away that right and tilts the balance so heavily in favour of the employer is something you would expect to see in authoritarian regimes, not Canada." (Smith, June 2011).

The approach taken by proponents of this bill should have us all concerned. In the weeks that followed, Governor Walker's proposal, thousands of people protested outside and inside the state capital in Madison, Wisconsin. Because the bill needed to be passed by the state senate as well as the assembly, fourteen Democratic state senators left Wisconsin in order to deny the senate a quorum and stall the vote. In spite of this issue producing the largest public protests in Madison since the Vietnam War, the Republican-controlled legislature passed the law which was signed by Governor Scott Walker in March. This was shrewdly accomplished by taking everything budget-related out of the bill, which negated the need for a quorum. It would later be argued that the union stripping bill was also a fiscal issue. In late May, Judge Maryann Sumi, officially ruled that the manner in which the bill was passed violated the state's Open Meetings law, and that the law itself was therefore not valid<sup>3</sup>. However, on June 14, 2011, with a 4-3 split, the state Supreme Court ordered the reinstatement of Governor Scott Walker's controversial plan to end most collective bargaining for tens of thousands of public workers. The court found that a committee of lawmakers was not subject to the state's open meetings law, and so did not violate that law. The changes on collective bargaining will take effect once Secretary of State Doug La Follette arranges for official publication of the stalled bill, and the high court said there was now nothing to preclude him from doing that. It is not known when the law will be published<sup>4</sup>. As the three dissenting judges of the Supreme Court put it, their colleagues rendered a "hasty judgement" where "the answers are not clear and our precedent is conflicting". They maintained that the order to overrule the lower court was "based on errors of fact and law"<sup>3</sup>. If their state legislature has the power to manipulate existing laws to push through unpopular policies with a "we don't have time for democracy" attitude, then our forces of justice, equality and dignity are in danger, as is democracy itself. As Senator Jon Erpenback put it, "Five to six decades of workers' rights were stomped out in a matter of seconds"<sup>5</sup>.

Alberta Federation of Labour president Gil McGowan issued a warning to right-wing politicians in Alberta. "If you try to implement similar anti-worker schemes here, you'll have a big fight on your hands," he says <sup>6</sup>. He further believes that the Tea Party Republican-controlled governments have launched attacks on unions in other parts of the U.S. Their biggest funders, the billionaire Koch brothers, have significant business links in Alberta, receiving and handling about 25 percent of the oil sands crude sent to the U.S., and warns that they will certainly not stay out of our politics. "Unions are important here, because there must be a counterbalance to the power and influence that big business holds over politicians."(McGowan, June 2011). Unions need to be safeguarded in order to maintain a high standard of services to our communities and to protect workers from severe budget cuts with no organized opposition. Members must continue to support the struggle in Wisconsin in solidarity against governments' attempts to destroy unions completely.

## References

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