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April 2011

In February and March, 2011, the state of Wisconsin witnessed the largest, most sustained political protests in its history. During these protests, the state capitol building in Madison was occupied by thousands of people for 17 days and rallies outside of the building reached over 100,000 people. The Wisconsin protests received tremendous national media attention, and were soon followed by labor mobilizations in Ohio, Michigan, Indiana and Maine. Here is the story of these events.

The Context

The state of Wisconsin is located on Lake Michigan northwest of Chicago. Historically the state was settled by German, Scandinavian and Polish immigrants in the 19th century. It has a population of five and a half million and a per capita income just below the U.S. national average. Economically the state is part of the declining industrial "rust belt," although Wisconsin has retained a somewhat larger manufacturing base than many other old industrial states, and currently has an unemployment rate well below the national average (7.5% compared to 8.8%). Politically the state is considered a "swing state", fairly evenly balanced between conservative Republican areas and more progressive Democratic areas. It is the state that in the 1940s and early 1950s elected Senator Joseph McCarthy, the strident right-wing anti-Communist whose name came to symbolize the political repression of the early Cold War. But it is also the state that has elected some of the most progressive politicians in American history.

In the 2008 presidential election, Obama won the state by a 56% to 42% margin, and the Democratic Party won both houses of the state legislature (the Governor was also a Democrat, elected in 2006). In the November 2010 state elections, the Republican Party won majorities in both legislative houses and the election for Governor. The Republican candidate, Scott Walker, backed by the right-wing Tea Party movement, ran on a broadly conservative platform, but his victory had less to do with strong popular support for his policy proposals than dissatisfaction with the condition of the Wisconsin economy and a feeling that a change of party might improve things. Turnout in the election dropped from over 60% in the 2008 presidential election to 49%, and based on exit polls, the decline was heavily concentrated in voters who had voted for Democrats in the earlier election. Apathy and a feeling of disappointment in the Democrats rather than a clear ideological shift marked the election.

The precipitating events

When Walker was inaugurated in January 2011, one of the first things he did was get the now Republican controlled legislature to pass a series of business-oriented tax cuts, which he defended on the grounds that these cuts would attract investment and create jobs. The tax breaks amounted for $140 million, squandering $121.4 million surplus for the current fiscal year that the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau had estimated. As a poster on the wall in his office stated, "Wisconsin is now open for business!" These cuts immediately created a budget "crisis". Since states in the U.S. are required by law to have a balanced budget, Walker introduced what is called a "budget repair bill." The bill contained a range of immediate budget cuts, but, more significantly, it also contained a series of provisions not directly related to the budget. In particular, the bill contained provisions designed to destroy public sector unions in the state of Wisconsin. The justification provided by Walker was that "curtailing" union rights was needed in order to give local and state government "flexibility" to deal with fiscal problems. But this was simply a political cover; the real motivation was to destroy the unions altogether.

Labor law in the United States is a complex combination of national laws and state laws. In particular, laws regulating unions for public sector employees are mainly state laws. Wisconsin was one of the first states to legally recognize public sector unions in 1959 and has had, by American standards, strong public sector unions ever since. While strikes by these public sector unions are illegal, they have strong collective bargaining rights linked to arbitration procedures over contract disputes. In Wisconsin around a third of public employees are in unions. Because of the precipitous decline of private sector unions (now less than 10% of employees) in recent decades, public sector unions have become the heart of the American labor movement. Conservatives in the United States have always been extremely hostile to unions, both because of the obvious class issues linked to union power, but also because of the political role that unions have played in supporting the Democratic Party. Walker and his supporters believed that his election to Governor and the switch of both houses of the state legislature to the Republican Party created a unique opportunity to attack the last important source of union strength.

Walker's anti-union bill was presented as "curtailing" union rights, but in fact it was a bill to destroy state sector unions (except for three unions that were exempted from its provisions – the police, state troopers, and firefighters. These three unions had all supported Walker in the election.) Under the provisions of the bill unions would be forced to hold certification elections every year. Union dues could not be automatically deducted from paychecks – members would have to pay directly every month. Unions would not be allowed to play a role in grievance procedures, and they would be prohibited from bargaining on all issues except pay – and even for pay, they could only bargain on pay raises up to the rate of inflation. Under these sets of legal provisions, state sector unions would quickly wither.

The bill was officially released on February 14, St. Valentine's Day. The protests began that day in a playful mood. The University of Wisconsin teaching assistants' association (TAA), the oldest union of student teachers and research assistants in the country, distributed Valentine cards to be sent to the Governor reading: "We ♥ UW: Don't Break My ♥" The following day, the State Assembly organized a public hearing, so that people could voice their opinion on the bill. While initially this was a mere formality, the hearing quickly became a space for union members and students to share life experiences and views about their state. Each testimony lasted two minutes, and in the aggregate they became a collective narrative of the situation of workers in the context of economic crisis the United States and the importance of unions in protecting worker rights. A nurse took a pen to calculate on a piece of paper the impact of the additional cuts proposed by Walker; she said she already lived on less than US$ 1,500 per month. A student recited "*The Internationale*." A teacher exclaimed to the representatives: "You do not know me yet, but you should love me. I am awesome. I educate your children. I work over 40 hours a week, half of which is not paid. I make this sacrifice because I love my job. This bill is proof of your misunderstanding of what a healthy society is and of your ingratitude."

The public hearing lasted for seventeen hours, and eventually the Republican representatives ended it. The TAA members, then, gathered at the entrance of the hearing room, shouting "Let us speak." Many people who had signed up to testify waited in line the whole night inside the Capitol. Testimonies continued on the 16th. That same day Madison school teachers organized a collective sick-out order to attend the protests against the bill. Many high school students came with them and by the afternoon more than 15,000 people were at the State

Capitol. The hearings, again, continued through the night, and as long as the hearings continued, the building remained open to the public.

Despite the mobilization, the governor announced that the bill would be voted on in the Senate the next day, February 17th. Since the Republicans held the majority of the seats and they were solidly in favor of the bill, it seemed certain to pass. But then something quite surprising happened. The rules of the Wisconsin State Senate stipulate that in order for a budget bill to pass there must be a 60% quorum. This meant that 20 Senators had to be present to vote on the bill. There were 19 Republicans and 14 Democrats in the Senate, so at least one Democrat had to be in the chamber when the vote was taken. To prevent the vote from occurring, all 14 Democrats left the state, driving to the adjacent state of Illinois where they remained for more than two weeks. The Governor sent state troopers to their homes to try to find them, but they were outside of the state's jurisdiction, so nothing could be done.

The exit of the state Senators meant that the bill could not be voted on. It also provided a tremendous boost to the protests. Thousands of people poured into the State Capitol building, creating a continuous intense indoors rally in addition to the protests, rallies and marches outside the building. Because the State Assembly hearings continued 24 hours a day, the building remained unlocked, and so more and more people came at night and stayed over. Within a few days this had become a mass occupation of the state capitol.

For the next two weeks the State Capitol was continuously occupied, until on March 3 the Governor ordered the capitol police to clear out the building. During those two weeks the protests became national and then international news. There were daily rallies outside the state capitol involving tens of thousands of people, swelling to 50,000 or more on weekends. The largest rally, at the end of the process, involved well over 100,000 people. This scale and duration of protest was unprecedented in Wisconsin history. The occupation of the state capitol building by thousands of people was the longest physical occupation of a government building by political protestors in American history. No one expected this intensity of response to the Governor's actions.

To give a richer sense of what these protests were like, we will first describe some of the distinctive social and cultural aspects of the protests – what it was like in the capitol building, what happened in the rallies, how the logistics of having thousands of people in the capitol were handled by the protesters – and the discuss the political objectives and developments in the course of the events.

Life inside the rotunda

The central space within the Capitol building is a large, circular rotunda extending upward to the inside of the capitol dome. Above the floor of the rotunda are two tiers of balconies. Every day from morning till late evening this space was packed with people chanting, giving speeches, and occasionally singing. The old American labor song "Solidarity Forever" was sung, probably for the first time, within the state capitol. Sometimes there were organized speeches, but more often not. In the middle of the rotunda, protesters organized an open space for people to come and voice whatever issues they wanted, ranging from broad analysis of American politics to daily challenges of the shared life in the Capitol. There were drum circles in the central space, often as many as fifteen or twenty drums, loudly accompanying the chants. For much of the time the noise was deafening.

The "opening" of the Capitol meant that anyone could enter the building and stay over. Students, homeless people, teachers, firefighters, environmentalists and others shared the space, building a unique sense of community. Capitol occupants created their own security collective, the "marshals," who walked around the building, making sure that sleeping-over protesters felt safe and knew where services were located, but also dealing with police officers -- many of the policemen on duty appeared to be sympathetic to the protests.

The first floor of the building and all of the balconies were covered with banners and posters, nearly all handmade. Care was taken to tape these posters to the walls with non-marking tape, and there was virtually no graffiti anywhere. One of the chants during the demonstrations referred to the capitol building as "The People's House", and considerable care was taken by those groups that occupied the building to be sure there was no damage to the facility and that the place was kept reasonably clean.

Very quickly, as people began spending nights in the building, food began to be delivered for free to the capitol to feed the demonstrators. At 2:00 a.m. the first night of the occupation, small pizza restaurant near the capital, Ian's Pizza, boxed up all of the unsold pizzas they had and brought them to the building. The next day this became a "human interest story" in the news, and soon Ian's pizza was getting orders to deliver pizza to the protestors from all over the United States and eventually from scores of countries around the world. A food station was set up in the building to receive deliveries, both from local sources and from elsewhere. For most of the period of the occupation of the building there was more than enough food for everyone involved.

Late in the afternoon every day of the protest there would be a rally outside of the building at which public figures would speak: democratic assemblyman; labor leaders, including the national head of the AFL-CIO; local political figures; celebrities like the film maker Michael Moore; and many ordinary citizens. A few days after the protests began the heads of the firefighters union and the police union each formally apologized to the citizens of Wisconsin for having supported the Governor in the election. They forcefully denounced the Governor's attempt to divide the labor movement by exempting their unions from the provisions of the bill. From then on, at every demonstration, there were off-duty firefighters and police in the marches with others. During the late afternoon rallies, the firefighters in full firefighter outfits would gather on a side street near the capitol building and then, lead by bag pipes, would march around the capitol building, then into the building and through the rotunda, exiting at the place where the rally was being held. They marched with placards saying "firefighters for labor" and were greeted by enthusiastic cheers of "Thank you! Thank you!" from the crowd. Off-duty firefighters and police also slept over the capitol. Further cementing a sense of solidarity with the protesters.

A striking feature of these protests was the broad intergenerational character of participation. Unlike anti-war demonstrations which are heavily weighted with university-age students, these protests included the elderly, retirees, prime working age people, families, students, children. And while the demonstrations were fairly homogeneous in racial terms – Wisconsin has a relatively small nonwhite population and much of this is concentrated in Milwaukee, 120 km away – they certainly included manual workers in both private and public sectors, public sector white collar workers, and professionals.

To a considerable extent the peacefulness and relative orderliness of the building occupation was the result of concentrated effort by a number of groups to see that this would happen. In particular, the University Teaching Assistant Association played a hugely important role in organizing the logistics of the occupation. Shortly after the occupation began, one of the Democrats in the state Assembly made a large conference room available to the TAA to use as their headquarters in the Capitol. The TAA organized the food station, a medical station, an information station, and a family center where parents could bring young children. They also organized training sessions on peaceful protest – which helped greatly in preventing provocations when Tea Party supporters came to protest the protests – and continually mobilized people to testify in the Assembly public hearings in an effort to prolong the occupation.

The political content of the protests

From the very beginning, the protesters emphasized that the conflict was not mainly over the proposed cuts in the state budget. While many placards did denounce the cuts, especially those targeted at public education, the central theme of the protests was the defense of labor rights and democracy. The union leadership publicly proclaimed the willingness of state workers to accept the financial aspects of the budget repair bill that affected them directly – especially, higher payments for health insurance and greater personal contributions to pensions. The unions largely accepted the rhetoric of the need for everyone to make "shared sacrifices" under the existing fiscal conditions. What they opposed was the elimination of union rights.

While some protesters accepted this framing of the issues, the central thrust of the slogans and chants of the protestors was that the entire bill should be killed and that the whole call for government austerity was a sham. Many placards called for increasing taxes on the rich and described the fiscal crisis as a phony crisis. What was especially striking for protests in the United States, the rhetoric of the protests consistently invoked the language of class and even class struggle. A typical kind of placard at a demonstration read "Welcome to Walker's Wisconsin: open for business. Come exploit our labor and our natural resources." Of course, in typical American fashion the language of class sometimes has a peculiar ring: "Support Unions; Support the middle class." But mostly the image was of polarized class conflict: the supporters of Walker were identified as capitalists, the rich, big corporations; the victims as the working class, workers, labor, the people.

Increasingly as the protests wore on the theme of democracy became prominent. While this may have been in part an effort by participants to broaden the symbolic appeal of the protests beyond union members – after all, even in Wisconsin union membership is under 15% of the labor force – but it also represented a recognition that the stakes in the conflict were not just the rights of those workers who happen to be in unions, but the robustness of democratic processes. One of the most common collective chant during the protests was the call-and-response "Tell me what democracy looks like: THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE!" In many of the speeches delivered at the rallies, speakers stressed the way that the attack on unions was an attack on democratic rights. Particularly in the American political context in which corporations have the right to spend unlimited amounts of money in political campaigns,

destroying unions removes the one large, organized non-business source of funding for electoral politics.

At a practical level, the main immediate objective of the protests was to create a shift in political climate that might ultimately block the passage of the bill, or at least its anti-union provisions. "Kill the Bill!" was the mantra. With the 14 state senators out of the state, the bill was at least delayed. The hope was that if the size of the protests kept increasing then perhaps some of the Republicans would feel pressure to change their stance on the bill. It quickly became clear, however, that this was unlikely. Only one Republican Senator expressed any doubts at all about the anti-union provisions.

The political objective then shifted to creating some momentum for an electoral recall of the Governor and some of the state senators. In Wisconsin, elected officials can be recalled if they have served in office for at least one year. The technical procedure for a recall election involves gathering petition signatures, the equivalent of 25% of the vote cast in the previous election, during a 60 day petition drive. That is a pretty demanding threshold, but within a few days petition drives were launched against eight Republican state senators that had been in office at least a year. Since the Governor had just been inaugurated, a petition for his recall could not be filed until January of 2012, so in his case the recall effort was directed towards getting pledges from people to sign the petition in November of 2011. As of April, 2011, two recall petitions directed at Republican Senators have acquired sufficient signatures for an election sometime in the summer.

The end of the protests

On March 3 Governor Walker engineered the removal of protesters from the capital building. The pretext was concerns about the building's security. The police, mostly from outside Madison, prevented virtually everyone from entering the building. The TAA had to leave the conference room graduate students had used as their headquarters. Protesters who refused to leave faced threats of arrest, even though none occurred. Rallies continued outside the building every day --with people chanting "Let us in!"--, but people were allowed in only in small numbers, when officially escorted by an elected member of the Assembly , and were not allowed to stay overnight.

Then, on March 9, the Republicans in the State Senate met and took the anti-union provisions out of the budget repair bill and treated them as a separate piece of legislation. Since this was no longer officially a budget bill, it no longer needed the 60% quorum, and so it could be passed with only Republican senators voting, which they promptly did 18-1. Some protesters managed to enter inside the building, and chanted so loudly that the Republican senators had to shout in the session. The police removed demonstrators who organized a sit-in in front of the Assembly Chamber. The word quickly spread through social media that the Senate had voted on the bill, and several thousand people descended on the capitol building in the early evening. With the tacit willingness of the police, the protestors entered the capitol for one last night in the building, briefly recreating the intensity of the previous weeks. In the morning, the remaining protesters were once again removed. The bill was quickly passed by the state Assembly on the 10th and then signed into law by the Governor.

A final major rally with well over 100,000 people was held on Saturday, March 12. It began in the morning with a tractorcade of small farmers from the area in support of workers,

and continued all afternoon. The 14 Senators who had left the state returned and spoke. It was spirited and energetic, but also signaled the end of this phase of the struggle in Wisconsin.

As of the middle of April the law has actually not yet been put into effect. A local judge has filed a temporary injunction against "publishing" the law – the last step before it goes into force – on the grounds that the procedure by which it passed violated the state's open meetings laws, which requires that there be 24 hours notice before a law is introduced for a vote and that the public be allowed to attend the vote. It isn't entirely clear now what will happen since there will be recall elections for at least two Senators, and it is possible that if the Senate is forced to revote on the bill there might be three Republican Senators who would change their vote. The general expectation is, however, that the anti-union legislation will eventually become law, and so its reversal will have to wait until there is a change in the political balance of forces in the state.

Some concluding comments

At the height of the financial crisis in 2008-9 there was some hope that the economic calamity would open up space for a more progressive set of state policies in the United States. Obama had been elected under a banner of the need for "change", and the values he espoused seemed to be broadly consistent with a more activist, affirmative state.

Those hopes were dashed by the extremely cautious stance Obama took at every step of the way in dealing with the economic crisis itself and in pushing his policy initiatives on healthcare and other issues. Within a very few months the right wing had begun concerted mobilization against his very moderate policies, and by the fall of 2009 had gained real initiative in redefining the central agenda of public debate. By the 2010 legislative elections the issue of the budget deficit and the "need" to cut state spending trumped other concerns. The center of gravity in political debate was over how much to reduce the role of the state, how much to cut spending and cut taxes, not over whether taxes and spending should be cut. The American capitalist class seems utterly indifferent to the consequences of these rabid anti-tax anti-state policies for the long-run vitality of the American economy. Except for a few fringe politicians on the left of the Democratic Party, no prominent politicians argued in the 2010 elections for the necessity of an activist state intervening to create more robust conditions for economic growth and raising taxes on the wealthy to do this.

That was the political climate in which the mass protests in Wisconsin erupted in mid-February. During the protests the public discourse dramatically shifted. Public support strongly backed the protesters: in polls over 70% of adults said that they would support raising taxes in order to avoid the cuts in the budget repair bill, and large majorities opposed the anti-union provisions. And as the protests dragged on, this support grew.

The events in Wisconsin have significant implications for the rest of the country. Similar battles against public sector unions are already being waged in other states – Michigan, Indiana, Ohio, Florida and others – and have been referred to as "Wisconsin-style" attacks on collective bargaining in the name of austerity politics. Wisconsin may be the first domino in a broader effort to break public sector unions. What the Wisconsin protests signal is the possibility of active resistance to these attacks as well as to the Tea Party movement and the strident anti-tax discourse pushed by the American right wing. The immediate and devastating costs for many families of the economic crisis and austerity policies, the threat to the schools on which their

hopes for their children rest, and the cutbacks in care for the vulnerable created a sense of moral outrage, both about the undemocratic character of the budget process and about the ideological justifications for public austerity. But before the Wisconsin protests erupted, the dominant response was resignation and apathy. What the protests have demonstrated is the potential for resistance and for transformation of the ideological climate. In the Wisconsin protests, the appeal to democracy, decency and discussion became paramount for many. For a time, at least, there was a sense that ordinary people can challenge the political and ideological offensive of corporate capitalism.

While it is too early to tell which view will prevail, the content of Walker's bill and the political process in Wisconsin have already begun to affect local party politics, union practices, legal processes, citizen mobilization, and the perception of American democracy, both in Wisconsin and elsewhere. It remains to be seen whether or not this shift in public opinion will be durable. And, of course, it also remains to be seen whether the Democratic Party, dependent as it increasingly is on corporate funding, will be willing to embrace this new energy to forge a more effective and progressive challenge to the right-wing forces that currently control the state.