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Wisconsin Erupts Ground Zero for National Movements

A coalition of government-union members, socialists, and other protesters — some of whom were bussed in from out of state — raucously invaded Madison, Wisconsin, beginning on February 16, to demonstrate against a budget bill backed by Republican Governor Scott Walker.



AP Images

The legislation that sparked the outrage, dubbed the “budget repair bill” by Gov. Walker and his supporters, would make an effort at closing a multi-billion-dollar budget deficit facing the state. In addition to requiring that government employees pay more toward their generous health and pension benefits, the bill would limit the ability of most state-worker unions to collectively bargain on matters ranging from working conditions to benefit packages.

Public-sector unions could still negotiate for higher pay, but only up to the federal government’s Consumer Price Index measure of inflation. After that, a referendum would be required to approve an increase. Also, most government unions would no longer be able to force workers to pay dues. A yearly vote would be taken to decide if the workers wish to continue allowing their unions to represent them.

Anti-reform Protests Break Out

The protests became so intense after a few days — officials estimated the number of demonstrators on various days at between 25,000 and over 70,000 — that Republican Gov. Walker even threatened to call out the state’s National Guard to quell the disorder and keep certain state functions such as the prison system running. Early on, some protesters pushed their behavior too far. At least nine protesters had been arrested by the afternoon of February 17, state officials reported.

The anti-Walker activists swarming the Capitol in Madison were caught vandalizing property, distributing subversive literature, putting fear into innocents, pounding on legislators’ doors and windows, shouting, and furiously banging drums, according to witnesses. Many slept in the Capitol building despite the usual policy of locking the doors after the work day.

The protesters’ rhetoric was intense. Some of them were videotaped carrying signs comparing Gov. Walker to Hitler, Mussolini, and deposed Egyptian despot Hosni Mubarak. Other more violent placards featured him with gun crosshairs trained on his face, and at least one suggested a “gang bang” rape of Tea Party activists. One sign likened the proposed budget cuts to rape. And on top of the rhetoric, the mob left behind mountains of trash in its wake, too.

Among the flyers being distributed at the events was one from the World Socialist Web Site entitled “Unite workers and youth to defeat Wisconsin budget cuts.” Produced by the Socialist Equality Party



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and International Students for Social Equality, the document urged protesters to use the demonstration in Wisconsin as “the starting point for a mass movement.” Solidarity with protesters in Egypt was also a prominent feature of the flyer.

Claiming that the “economic and political system has failed,” the groups exhorted demonstrators to reject both parties, create “independent committees” of students and workers, nationalize corporations, seize “the wealth,” and usher in socialism. “The capitalist system has failed and must be replaced with a new type of society based on social need,” the flyer stated, promoting the transformation of businesses into “publicly owned and democratically controlled entities.”

Another flyer from the protests obtained by The New American, headlined “Collective Bargaining is a MUST!” called for higher taxes on corporations and “the rich.” It proposed a series of new taxes and tax increases to balance the state budget, urging readers to visit [socialistworker.org](#) for more information and updates.

A table set up and staffed by socialist activists at the demonstrations — adorned with a poster reading, “From Cairo to Madison, workers unite!” — displayed *Communist Manifestos* and other socialist books. One of the women at the International Socialist Organization’s booth, who said on camera that she was a government worker in Wisconsin, claimed the response to the reform proposals “partly reflects that we just spent a month watching people hold revolutions and stand up in a way that frankly I didn’t imagine was possible in the near term.” Another person at the booth said the socialist group was planning to use Egypt’s example to “have something like that here.”

But despite the fear, chaos, and damage the demonstrators inflicted, organizers and protest leaders were quite happy with the demonstrations. “I have never been prouder of our movement than I am at this moment,” Wisconsin AFL-CIO President Phil Neuenfeldt told the crowd. Other union leaders and socialist organizers made similar remarks.

Outside Involvement

Former “community organizer” and current President Barack Obama jumped into the fray early on, too. In an interview with a Wisconsin television station, he said the measures seemed like “an assault on unions.” Obama also urged viewers not to blame government employees for all the budget problems. “I think it is very important for us to understand that public employees, they’re our neighbors, they’re our friends. These are folks who are teachers and they’re firefighters and they’re social workers and they’re police officers.”

Numerous other national figures including prominent Senators and Congressmen weighed in on both sides of the issue as well. But Gov. Walker dismissed the rhetoric from Obama and other D.C. Democrats, urging them to get their own affairs in order first. “We’re focused on balancing our budget, it would be wise for the President and others in Washington to focus on balancing their budget, which they’re a long way from doing,” he told Fox News.

The protests were organized by government-union bosses from around the country and the Democratic National Committee’s Organizing for America, which helped propel the Obama campaign to victory. A broad coalition of socialist and statist groups, many of which — like the Midwest Academy — have close ties to Obama and his socialist-terrorist friend Bill Ayers, participated in the organizing as well. So-called “community organizers” tied to radical Saul Alinsky played a big role, too, as did national leftist



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groups like MoveOn.org.

On the other side, national conservative-minded groups eventually got involved in support of Gov. Walker and his proposals. After witnessing the massive machine orchestrating the original demonstrations, groups such as American Majority and Americans for Prosperity helped coordinate rallies to express solidarity with reformers attempting to rein in the budget deficit and the powerful government-employee unions — among the largest contributors to Democratic political coffers.

But despite the size and ferocity of the anti-reform protests, the Governor said he had received thousands of e-mails on the subject, most supporting his plan. He also noted that the protests had only made him more resolute in his desire to save the state from a catastrophic budget hole, saying he would not be intimidated by the government-union protesters — particularly those from out of state — and that he intended to continue pushing the needed reforms.

Very few Republicans wavered in their support for the proposals even after a week of daunting protests. If just three GOP state Senators had backed down, the measure would have failed. But with recent electoral gains, the party can pass the legislation without support from any Democrats — assuming runaway Democrat lawmakers come back to the Capitol for a quorum to allow the vote to take place.

Runaway Democrats

Democrat lawmakers fled the state in an effort to delay the proposals until the GOP was willing to compromise, prompting strong and swift Republican criticism. A vote cannot take place in the Senate unless at least one Democrat is present to make a quorum, and the runaway legislators had not returned two weeks after the demonstrations started. All of them were reportedly waiting in Illinois at “undisclosed locations” in an effort to avoid capture. Leftist groups and unions around the country were sending the Senators “care packages” and encouraging them to stand firm.

“We’ll be here until Gov. Walker decides that he wants to talk,” Democratic state Sen. Tim Carpenter told the *Huffington Post* several days after he fled with his colleagues. “In a democracy, I thought we were supposed to talk. But the thing is, he’s been a dictator, and just basically said this is the only thing. No amendments, and it’s going to be that way.”

But Gov. Walker urged the missing Democrats to quit their “stunt” and “do the job they’re paid to do.” He said that if the standoff continued, he would consider cutting their offices’ funding. “If they’re not here, it begs the question whether or not they need to have staff,” Walker said. “They’re not performing their functions.” The Republicans did pass a measure requiring that the runaway Democrats appear on the Senate floor while the Senate is in session to pick up their checks, instead of having the checks directly deposited in banks and another to fine them \$100 per day.

Other Republican leaders suggested law enforcement should bring the legislators to work if they were still within state borders. One report said state troopers had indeed been dispatched to track them down. Petitions to recall some of the missing state Senators were also being circulated days after they first disappeared, and some Tea Partiers at a pro-reform rally carried signs urging the missing lawmakers to come back to work.

GOP legislative leaders were also considering other methods of passing the bill and said the reforms would be implemented regardless of Democrats’ obstructionism. The Republican Assembly leadership issued a statement after the first week of protests noting that, despite the decision to recess over



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protest-related security concerns, the reforms would pass. “We are committed as ever to pass Governor Walker’s Budget Repair Bill.... Millions of taxpayers spoke in November and we will not let them down. We have a fiscal crisis that can’t be ignored. We have the votes to pass the bill; it is only a matter of time.”

Potential Trouble for Lying Teachers, Doctors Gone Wild

In addition to the Democrat lawmakers who didn’t turn up for work in an effort block the reform bill, thousands of teachers also skipped school by calling in sick at the behest of union leaders in order to demonstrate. Taxpayers, meanwhile, still had to report for work. And in addition to the lying educators, more than a few doctors at the demonstrations were caught on video handing out bogus excuses to whomever asked. Now, the people of Wisconsin and their officials want answers for what critics are referring to as outright fraud.

So many teachers skipped school to attend the protests that numerous schools across the state were actually forced to shut down for several days. Estimates on the cost of the teachers’ absences range from \$6 million on the low end, to almost \$10 million on the higher side after just the first week. Parents, who generally still had to work despite the turmoil, were left scrambling to find something to do with their children as schools closed down.

The missing educators — as well as others who reported to work and encouraged students to join their political cause — sparked a furor among Wisconsinites and commentators, many of whom are calling for serious consequences. Some are even pushing to have the teachers fired, though union contracts would probably not allow that.

Conservative columnist Michelle Malkin suggested docking their pay. “Turn in a fake doctor’s note ... receive a rubber paycheck in return,” she wrote. “Monopoly money will do, too. If these union heavies want to play games with families’ lives, they should reap the consequences to their own bank accounts.” Malkin said recent events were a “perfect illustration” of Democrat Party values: “Educational malpractice. Medical malpractice. Economic malpractice.”

Noting that teachers are supposed to be role models for their students, *Washington Post* columnist Esther Cepeda blasted the example they were setting. “The teachers were cheese-brained for walking out of work, denying schooling for four days to the very students they profess to care so much about — even after the head of the state’s largest teacher’s union, the Wisconsin Education Association Council, asked them to return to their classrooms,” the former teacher charged in the piece, entitled “No apple for Wisconsin’s teachers.”

And perhaps due to the outrage, at least some school districts have now promised to investigate. According to news reports, school officials in the Madison and Milwaukee school districts intend to verify all sick notes handed in during the relevant period. “There’s no rubber stamp,” a spokeswoman for the Milwaukee Public Schools told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, noting that the excuse slips would be sent to the human resources department for review. Countless teachers were caught on camera admitting they lied to attend the protests.

At least four separate doctors were caught writing bogus notes to cover for the lying teachers, too. One doctor shown on camera by a local Fox News affiliate was walking around carrying a big sign reading, “I’m a doctor — need a note?” Another had a similar placard, reading, “I’m a Dr. — need a work note?”



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The Wisconsin-based MacIver News Service also caught several doctors red-handed on video.

But the medical personnel who wrote the fake excuses could be in hot water, too. Both the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine, where several of the doctors work, and the Wisconsin Medical Society vowed to investigate. "If these reports are accurate, the Society does not condone these actions under any circumstances," the Wisconsin Medical Society said on February 21, noting that it had already started to investigate the allegations.

The university was even more blunt. "These UW Health physicians were acting on their own and without the knowledge or approval of UW Health. These charges are very serious."

Any disciplinary action taken will follow the university's "established procedures." And since it is a "personnel matter," it will not be public information, the statement said.

Of course, after being caught, some of the doctors tried to justify their actions. "Some people think it's a nod-and-a-wink thing but it's not," University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health Doctor Lou Sanner told the Associated Press. "One of the biggest stresses in life is the threat of loss of income, loss of job, loss of health insurance. People have actually been getting ill from this, or they can't sleep." Sanner admitted to writing hundreds of medical-absence excuses.

But prominent voices in the field aren't buying it. "When all's said and done, it's really the profession of medicine that has the black eye in this case," Arthur Derse, the director of the Center for Bioethics and Medical Humanities at the Medical College of Wisconsin, told *The Atlantic* after seeing the videos of doctors writing fake notes.

Tea Party Support for Reforms

After several days of non-stop anti-Walker protests, a coalition of conservative and Tea Party groups rallied in Madison on Saturday, February 19, to support the newly elected Governor and his proposals. Organized in part by American Majority and other groups, the conservative rally went under the banner "I Stand with Walker." A line-up of several nationally known personalities spoke to the assembled activists. Among them were "Joe the Plumber," conservative media boss Andrew Breitbart, and potential presidential candidate and former Godfather's Pizza CEO Herman Cain.

Cain, who only recently rose to prominence among segments of the conservative movement, told the cheering crowd that it was time for solutions. Standing at the podium surrounded by Tea Partiers, he said: "Over the last couple of days, America has heard from the ten percent.... Let me tell you something about the 90 percent of the workforce that maybe the ten percent have forgotten: *We pay the bills!*"

Andrew Breitbart, who runs the conservative news website [breitbart.com](#) and others like it, complained that teachers were calling in sick when they were not, in order to protest against the reforms. "What kind of lesson" does it teach the children that their instructors were "willing to lie?" he wondered.

Executive director Tim Phillips of the free-market activist group Americans for Prosperity, which also helped organize the rally, spoke as well. Telling the audience that "the eyes of the entire nation are on you today," Phillips said America was undergoing a "revolution" of "fiscal sanity." He also led the activists in chanting "do your job," referring to runaway State Senate Democrats who fled Wisconsin in an effort to prevent a vote on Gov. Walker's proposed reforms. The group collected almost 100,000



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signatures on a petition supporting Gov. Walker by February 26.

Many anti-Walker protesters were also at the Capitol during the Tea Party rally. Though some intense exchanges took place between them and Tea Partiers (sometimes nose to nose), physical violence did not break out and police reported there were no arrests that day. "If the eyes of the nation and the world are truly upon us, then I think we've been able to show that democracy can work well, even if those who have passionate views on different sides come together," Madison police spokesman Joel DeSpain told the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*.

During the controversy, however, some anti-Walker protesters have been expressing their "passionate views" via violent rhetoric and signage, suggesting that physical violence was and is a very real possibility. Numerous Twitter users actually called for Walker's death.

Estimates of the crowd size that Saturday varied widely, but there were at least tens of thousands of people around the Capitol and several thousand Tea Party activists. One speaker at the pro-Walker rally said there were 10,000 people at the pro-reform event, while officials cited in news reports estimated the overall crowd around the Capitol (both pro- and anti-Walker) at about 60,000.

Chaos Already Spreading

As protests in Wisconsin dragged into their second week, both sides held support rallies for their cause across the country. Dozens of gatherings referred to as "solidarity events" were hosted across the United States to back the anti-reform Wisconsin demonstrators the week after the protests started.

A coalition of leftist groups including MoveOn.org and People for the American Way also organized rallies in all 50 state capitals on February 26. The "solidarity" protests were organized under the banner of "Save the American Dream" rallies. "It's not just Wisconsin. Republicans are launching a coordinated assault on workers in other states, too," MoveOn.org said in a letter to supporters urging them to rally in state capitals. "That's why we need to nationalize the fight — to show Republicans that we won't fight back state-by-state, but as a united, national movement." The Communist Party and its propaganda organs also encouraged their supporters to do the same.

Similar rallies were also held in support of Walker. The non-profit American Majority, through the website www.istandwithwalker.com, called for "a national demonstration of support for Scott Walker and leaders across the country who have the courage to fight the public sector union bosses" on February 23. "This is the moment and opportunity for the tea partiers, and those who want limited government and support the free market, to stand firm against the greed and dangerous statist philosophy of the public sector unions," the group's president, Ned Ryun, said in a statement.

Many analysts predict the chaos in Wisconsin is actually just a foreshadowing of a broader conflict that will soon paralyze states across the nation. Both sides have emphasized that similar battles are playing out around the country, and that the results in Wisconsin will have broad implications for other states and the federal government. And considering the states' fiscal situations — just unfunded pension liabilities are estimated at around \$3 trillion — the battle over austerity is just getting started. And Wisconsin, at least compared to states like New Jersey, California, and Illinois, was doing relatively well fiscally.

Bloomberg reported on February 18 that several thousand government employees converged on the Ohio state Capitol to battle similar measures. Tea Partiers also showed up to support loosening the grip



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of government unions. The number of demonstrators eventually swelled to a reported 15,000 and, in its second week, showed no signs of letting up.

By February 21, union protests had also spread to Indiana as the demonstrations in Ohio were still growing. Democrat lawmakers, following their colleagues in Wisconsin, fled the state as well. And labor leaders have vowed to continue fighting similar budget-cutting proposals across the country.

GOP Governors across America are also getting ready for a showdown. They recently banded together through the Republican Governors Association to support Gov. Walker, even setting up a website under the banner "Stand with Scott."

Libertarians see it too. The Future of Freedom Foundation President Jacob Hornberger, in an opinion piece, noted that he sensed a broader struggle. "With the federal government itself hurtling toward bankruptcy owing to its ever-increasing welfare-warfare state spending and debt, and with such foreign welfare states as Greece and Ireland on the ropes, and now with American state governments in financial straits, the world might just be witnessing the death throes of the welfare state at all levels of government."

Hornberger's solution: separate school and state, get the government out of charity, end the drug war, and fire all of the bureaucrats associated with those issues. "It's time to ask that fundamental question: What should be the role of government in a free society? Once we answer that question, we can then dismantle all the departments, agencies, and bureaucracies that are engaged in illegitimate activity and end all the spending, taxes, and borrowing needed to sustain them," he noted.

State and local governments all over America are wrestling with massive budget deficits and unfunded pension liabilities that threaten to bankrupt their treasuries — not to mention the taxpayers. Numerous Governors — even including some Democrats — have already started the process of reducing state-employee pensions and benefits in states from New Jersey to Florida. Municipalities and local governments are facing similar scenarios, with many opting to raise taxes on their already-hard-pressed citizens. But considering the fiscal train wreck of most government entities in the United States and even around the world, observers expect the battles to continue intensifying and spreading before the problems are resolved.



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