

Forewarned is Forearmed: The battle for collective bargaining in the U.S

By Doug Berry March 3, 2011

For those of us who are not regular readers of American news you might be surprised at the political shifts currently being felt in the “seat of democracy”.

The Republicans, who are much adored by Harper, have used their might in the state legislatures across the country to attack unionized public workers and by extension all workers in an aggressive attempt to cut wages, benefits and more importantly, actually take away the right of collective bargaining. You heard it correctly, I’ll say it again, take away the right of collective bargaining which, as we all know, fundamental to the union movement. The rallying point for this action has been the legislature in Madison Wisconsin where thousands of activists have been hitting the bricks and have occupied the legislative building for 21/2 weeks to mark their opposition to this madness. This action has spread like wildfire to other Republican dominated states who are watching the Madison revolt with great interest and are themselves enduring repeated demonstrations on the steps of their respective legislatures.

Protesters of this attempt to return working people back to the dark ages have found strong support from their fellow citizens. According to a US Today Gallup poll 61 percent of Americans would oppose a law in their state taking away the collective bargaining power of public employee unions. Oddly enough, in the same poll 46 percent of the respondents said that unions were harmful to the states while 43 percent claimed they were helpful.

Why should Canadians worry? One only needs to look back at the abuse of power in the Chretien years when Hughie Stewart the mountie let loose with a gallon of pepper spray on citizens who were obeying his command but apparently not fast enough during the APEC meetings in Vancouver. This same function took a student activist off the street who was held for 11 hours and whose plain clothes captors would not identify themselves. Recent abuses of power that our government turned a blind eye to during the G20 demonstrations in 2010 can only lead us to one conclusion. Your constitutional rights are only as strong as the government in power wants them to be.

Should Mr. Harper receive a majority in the next election we will undoubtedly see a return to the Mike Harris, Ernie Eves culture where labour law legislation came under attack and anti-scab legislation was repealed. Our collective bargaining rights are sacrosanct and must be defended with all the strength that is left in us. Simply said, don’t put your trust in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms to protect collective bargaining rights. Be a collective bargaining activist and let our government know that we will not sit idly by and watch what took generations to build be torn down in a sordid attempt to please big business. These national and multi-national corporations are already enjoying a low wage world that they have created through their illegal manipulation of Wall Street and instilling fear in working people and their families.

Latest update: Wisconsin is deep in uncharted territory with its budget battle—Democrats are in self-imposed exile and the Republican Party is in charge of a statehouse that has become a nationally televised street theater stage in recent days. But, as The Daily Beast's John Avlon reports, Gov. Scott Walker can use a little-known but constitutional maneuver to break the impasse over unions' rights. This means that if the collective bargaining were delinked from the budget measures and put forward as a separate bill, it could be passed with 51 percent of the legislators—and without Democrats' participation.