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USA

The New American Workers Movement at the Crossroads

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The new American workers movement, which has developed so rapidly in the last couple of months in the struggle against rightwing legislative proposals to abolish public employee unions, suddenly finds itself at a crossroads. Madison, Wisconsin, where rank-and-file workers, community members, and social movement activists converged to create the new movement, remains the center of the struggle. In Ohio, which faces similar legislation, unions have also gone into motion, while working people around the country have been drawn into the fight

In both states, things are coming to a head. In Wisconsin the courts have ordered the capitol building closed and the governor is threatening layoffs to begin next week. In both Wisconsin and Ohio the legislators are threatening to push the bills through one way or another. And now, in the fight to win, the movement has come to a fork in the road.

Two different tendencies in the labor movement point in two quite different directions. The top leaders of the AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions like SEIU have thrown their weight into the struggle in the only way that they know how. Following the model they use in political campaigns, they have reached out to established organizations to build coalitions. They have sent organizers into take charge and to reach out to communities. Their goal is to rebuild their institutional power and their relationship with the Democratic Party, hoping to turn the upsurge in support for public employees into a political victory.

The Union Leaders' Approach

In both Wisconsin and Ohio, while not publicly giving up the fight to defeat the anti-union legislation, the top union officials quietly suggest that the bills cannot be stopped in the legislatures. So the unions in Wisconsin and Ohio indicate they will be turning respectively to efforts at recall and referendum. With their usual orientation toward political solutions, the unions' Central Labor Councils in Ohio return to their reliance on the Democratic Party and prepare for the contest in the coming elections.

The unions' top leaders at the national level shy away from mobilizing the social and economic power of the unions to win this thing, turning instead to their allies in the Democratic Party. It is not that the union officials don't want to win in Wisconsin and Ohio, but their notions about how to win and what winning means represent a particular conception of the role of the labor movement. For the AFL-CIO and other major unions, winning means preserving, through political influence, the existing model of collective bargaining—even though we know that under the existing model unions have been losing for the last 40 years.

The Workers Power Tendency

There is, however, another tendency in the new workers' movement which presents a different alternative. This alternative, which is not so easy to name but which might be called workers' power tendency, is made up of those rank-and-file workers and their union stewards and local officials, together with the community groups and social movement activists who have rallied to the cause. This group includes the teachers who called in sick and produced a virtual shutdown of the schools in Madison and other parts of Wisconsin. It is made up of firemen, policemen and other public employees who have spent every available minute surrounding the capitol in spirited demonstrations. And it includes the union, community and student activists who have occupied the capitol building and made it the center and the symbol of the new workers' movement.

This tendency has demonstrated—even it is has not yet worked out an elaborate position on paper or issued some sort of manifesto—that for them winning means using workers' power to stop the anti-union bills and to stop concessions offered up by some of the union leaders. Some of these workers have been holding on to the capitol risking arrest. Others are considering some form of direct action or civil disobedience.

These are the workers and their supporters who taken seriously the call for a general strike issued by the South Central Federation of Labor. Taking seriously the idea of a general strike of Wisconsin workers doesn't mean jumping into it. A general strike issue from the ranks isn't simply called—as some activists have been trying to do. A general strike is mulled over, it is prepared through conversation, discussion and debate. It is organized. And finally (but soon), when the moment is right, it is begun when one crucial group of workers has the courage to make the first move drawing others into the process.

How We Win Makes all the Difference

One might argue that the anti-labor legislation might be stopped either way, either by the union officials' program of working from the top down to build coalitions and create the alliances that will return the Democrats to power or by the workers' use of their economic and social power. Through either course, one could argue, the anti-union legislation will be stopped, unions and collective bargaining preserved, and the movement vindicated. But the lessons of the two courses and the results would be quite different.

The lesson of a victory organized by the union officials and won by the Democratic Party in the legislatures would be that workers must rely on the Democratic Party to defend themselves, returning unions and workers to their usual dependence on a political party dominated by big business. We might remember that it was the Democratic Party's failure in Wisconsin and nationally to defend unions and workers' interests which has been responsible for getting us here. The result of the top union officials' strategy would be a return to the situation we were in yesterday, where employers forced the unions into retreat and where workers were losing ground. And so, it being yesterday again, the assault on workers in both the private and the public sector would resume—in truth, it would never have ceased.

The other alternative is that workers in Wisconsin, Ohio and other states engaged in this battle—and almost all of them—exert their economic and social power, through direct action, civil disobedience, and economic and political strikes, reasserting the power of workers in our society. The lesson of such an experience would be that workers do have power and that workers can lead. Such an upheaval—which would necessarily be met by the employers with resistance and repression and which would entail both defeats and successes—would necessarily lead to new tactics and strategies, to new leaders, to new organizational forms.

We would come out of the experience with a new and revitalized labor movement. Such a new workers' movement might even create independent political campaigns, and, if it grew in breadth and depth, might even raise the question of a workers' political party. We would through the experience of fighting and winning this thing on our own, really have a new American workers movement and we would continue the fight on new and higher ground.