

# ***IN CRITICAL SOLIDARITY***

NEWSLETTER OF AMERICAN SOCIOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION'S  
SECTION ON LABOR AND LABOR MOVEMENTS

Summer 2012  
Volume 11, No. 1

## **Chair**

Chris Tilly  
*University of California, Los Angeles*

## **Chair-Elect**

Steven H. Lopez  
*Ohio State University*

## **Past Co-Chair**

Carolina Bank Munoz  
*Brooklyn College*

## **Secretary-Treasurer**

Ellen Reese  
*University of California, Riverside*

## **Council**

Steven McKay  
*University of California, Santa Cruz*  
Ian Robinson  
*University of Michigan*  
Robyn Magalit Rodriguez  
*Rutgers University*

## **Student Representative**

Clare Hammonds  
*Brandeis University*

## **Section Homepage**

<http://asalabormovements.weebly.com/index.html>

## **Website Editor**

Paul Morgan

## **Newsletter Editor**

Michael A. McCarthy  
*New York University*

## **SPECIAL FEATURE:**

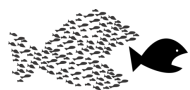
***Symposium on the Future of Labor Scholarship, Part I***



LABOUR'S MAY DAY  
DEDICATED TO THE WORKERS OF THE WORLD

## ***In this issue***

|   |          |
|---|----------|
| From the chair                            | 2        |
| 2012 ASA sessions on labor                | 2        |
| <b>Symposium: Labor scholarship, pt.1</b> | <b>5</b> |
| The Wisconsin recall & the unions         | 7        |



**From the chair:  
Labor futures, utopian and otherwise**

In this special issue on the future of labor scholarship, I will start in the *near* future, with four great reasons to join us at the ASA meetings in Denver, then comment briefly on the longer term future.

So, top four reasons to join us in Denver: **#4**, amazing, timely section sessions on “Transnational Capital and Labor” and “U.S. Labor and Politics” (both on Friday)! **#3**, equally amazing thematic sessions on Real Utopias, including sessions on worker coops, fair trade, food justice, the solidarity economy, grassroots activism, and “Workers’ Search for Utopia”! **#2**, a rockin’ section meeting (at the unfortunate hour of 9:30 on Friday morning) at which we will begin planning a miniconference on global themes for ASA New York 2013 (including visiting Chinese labor sociologists as part of our exchange with counterparts in China)! **#1**, a scintillating reception (Friday evening) in the fine Labor Section tradition, spotlighting Denver worker center and interfaith activists!

Looking beyond August, it seems to me the most urgent point about the future of labor scholarship is that it will depend on the future of *labor*—and should be directed toward making that future better. I have been a member of the former Industrial Relations Research Association (now renamed the Labor and Employment Research Association) for over 20 years, and have unhappily watched that organization shrink as “labor relations” has been displaced by unilateral, management-dictated “human resources”. By the same token, the “and Labor Movements” portion of our section’s mandate depends on the persistence or better, resurgence of movements. To avoid a future that looks more like a Real Dystopia, we must direct our research to the critical needs of working people in the U.S. and around the world: restoring employment, reducing inequality, and rebuilding collective worker voice.

But of course, that is exactly what makes the Labor *and Labor Movements* Section distinctive: we are public sociologists in the best sense, committed to shaping popular understanding, supporting worker mobilization, and stimulating public policy. I am proud to have served as your Chair for the past year, and

look forward to continuing to work with all of you for a future of cutting-edge social science that makes a difference.

Chris Tilly

## ***2012 ASA sessions related to labor***

### ***Section on Labor and Labor Movements Roundtable Session.***

Fri, Aug 17 - 8:30am - 9:30am

### ***Section on Labor and Labor Movements Business Meeting***

Fri, Aug 17 - 9:30am - 10:10am

Chair: Chris Tilly (University of California-Los Angeles)

Participant: Carolina Bank Munoz (City University of New York-Brooklyn College and Graduate Center)

Participant: Clare Hammonds (Brandeis University)

Participant: Steven H. Lopez (Ohio State University)

Participant: Steven McKay (University of California-Santa Cruz)

Participant: Ian Robinson (University of Michigan)

Participant: Robyn Magalit Rodriguez (State University of New Jersey-Rutgers)

### ***Section on Labor and Labor Movements Paper Session. Transnational Capital and Labor***

Fri, Aug 17 - 10:30am - 12:10pm

Session Organizer: Kyle John Arnone (University of California-Los Angeles)

Presider: Manjusha S. Nair (State University of New Jersey-Rutgers)

Global Chains, Global Workers: Warehouse Workers’ Experience of Globalized Labor Processes and Transnational Class Relations

\*Jason Y. Struna (University of California-Riverside)

Remembering and Re-membering: Migrant Labor, Memory Mobilization, and Member Participation in HERE and SEIU Locals

\*Michael Gould-Wartofsky (New York University)

Prearious Politics: Struggles for Redistribution and Recognition in the United States and South Africa

\*Marcel Paret (University of California-Berkeley)

Employment Relations and Social Exclusion: A Marxian/Polanyian Analysis of Neoliberalism in Turkey

\*Hatice Deniz Yukseker (Koc University)

Discussant: Lu Zhang (Temple University)

**Section on Labor and Labor Movements Paper Session. U.S. Labor and Politics**

Fri, Aug 17 - 2:30pm - 4:10pm

Session Organizer: Barry Eidlin (University of California-Berkeley)

Presider: Adam Slez (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

An Analysis of Labor Union Participation in Congressional Hearings, 1972-2008

\*Kyle W. Albert (Cornell University)

Fighting for a Fair Economy? The Response of Labor Unions to Economic Crisis, 2005-2010

\*Ann Shirley Leymon (University of Oregon)

Labor's Share of Income and Macro-economic Stability

\*Edo Navot (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Re-politicizing Work: Research-intensive Labor Organizing Strategies in Two Geographic Campaigns

\*Pablo U. Gaston (University of California-Berkeley)

Discussant: Adam Slez (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

**Thematic Session. Workers' Search for Utopia**

Sat, Aug 18 - 8:30am - 10:10am

Session Organizer: Howard A. Kimeldorf (University of Michigan)

Session Organizer: Barry Eidlin (University of California-Berkeley)

Presider: Barry Eidlin (University of California-Berkeley)

Panelist: Peter B. Evans (University of California-Berkeley)

Panelist: Howard A. Kimeldorf (University of Michigan)

Panelist: Pun Ngai (Hong Kong University of Science and Technology)

Panelist: Gay W. Seidman (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

**Regular Session. Labor/Labor Movement**

Sat, Aug 18 - 8:30am - 10:10am

Session Organizer: Jake Rosenfeld (University of Washington)

Presider: Jake Rosenfeld (University of Washington)

Agents of Arts Trade Union Revitalization: Corporate and Entrepreneurial Generations of Nashville Arts Union Activists

\*Daniel B. Cornfield (Vanderbilt University)

Development and Impact of Private Equity on US Firms, Workers, and Employment Relations

\*Rosemary Batt (Cornell University), Eileen Appelbaum (State University of New Jersey-Rutgers),

\*Jae Eun Lee (Cornell University)

Election Timing, Rule Changes, and the Politics of Labor Reform and the NLRB

\*Kate Bronfenbrenner (Cornell University), \*Dorian T. Warren (Columbia University)

Turning Labor into Capital: The Politics of Union Pension Fund Investment in America, 1945-1985

\*Michael A. McCarthy (New York University)

Union Revitalization in the Building Trades

\*Martin Kosla (Ohio State University)

Discussant: Jake Rosenfeld (University of Washington)

**Regular Session. Unemployment and Labor Market Inequality**

Sat, Aug 18 - 10:30am - 12:10pm

Session Organizer: Jennie E. Brand (University of California-Los Angeles)

Presider: Elisabeth Julia Simon Thomas (University of California-Los Angeles)

Fat and Mean? A New Perspective on Downsizing Using EEO-1 Data

\*Matissa Hollister (Dartmouth College)

The Career Disadvantage of Unemployment: Cumulating, Persisting or Accelerating?

\*Irma Mooi-Reci (Free University Amsterdam), Anna Manzoni (North Carolina State University), Cees Elzinga (VU University)

Does Veteran Status Have a Structural Effect on Earnings?

\*Daniel Joseph Della Posta (Cornell University)

Labor Market Outcomes of Black African Immigrants in the United States

\*Rebecca Tesfai (University of Pennsylvania)

Discussant: Leslie McCall (Northwestern University)

**Regular Session. Gender and Work in Comparative Perspective**

Sat, Aug 18 - 10:30am - 12:10pm

Session Organizer: Claudia Geist (University of Utah)

Presider: Brian Joseph Gillespie (University of California-Irvine)

Class versus Gender Equality? Gender-class Wage Gaps in Three Liberal Markets

\*Lynn Prince Cooke (University of Surrey)

Mapping Gender Ideologies Globally: Gender Attitudes in 63 Countries

\*Xiaoling Shu (University of California-Davis)

National Work Orientation and Work-to-Nonwork Interference: Evidence from 31 Nations

\*Leah E. Ruppner (University of Hawaii-Hilo), David J. Maume (University of Cincinnati)

The Gender Gap in Perceived Job Insecurity in Comparative Perspective

\*Andrew S. Fullerton (Oklahoma State University), Jeffrey C. Dixon (College of the Holy Cross), Dwanna Lynn Robertson (University of Massachusetts)

Work-family Policies and Mothers' Employment Hours Cross-nationally

\*Irene S. Boeckmann (University of Massachusetts-Amherst), \*Joya Misra (University of Massachusetts),

\*Michelle J. Budig (University of Massachusetts)

Discussant: Catherine I. Bolzendahl (University of California-Irvine)

**Regular Session. Work and Politics of Precarious Labor: Views from the Global South**

Mon, Aug 20 - 8:30am - 10:10am

Session Organizer: Ching Kwan Lee (University of California-Los Angeles)

Presider: Ching Kwan Lee (University of California-Los Angeles)

Exclusion, Social Protections and Precarious Work in Mekong Southeast Asia

\*Dennis Arnold (Maastricht University)

Why Don't Informal Workers Organize? The Livelihoods and Politics of South Africa's Marginalized Labor Force

\*Ben Scully (Johns Hopkins University)

Workplace and Community Struggles of a Fragmented Working Class: Unions and Politics of Informality (Argentina)

\*Rodolfo Gaston Elbert (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

The Precariat's Challenge to Social Theory: Iran's Income Grant as an Unlikely Case Study

\*Kevan Harris (Johns Hopkins University)

A Second Marriage? An Intersection of Marxism and Feminism Among India's Informal Workers

\*Rina Agarwala (Johns Hopkins University)

Discussant: Ruth Milkman (City University of New York-Graduate Center)

**Section on Organizations, Occupation and Work Paper Session. The Working Poor and Low-wage Work**

Mon, Aug 20 - 10:30am - 12:10pm

Session Organizer: David Brady (Social Science Research Center-Berlin)

Presider: David Brady (Social Science Research Center-Berlin)

Frontline Hospital Jobs: Career Stepping Stone or Just Another Dead-end Low-wage Job?

\*Janette S. Dill (University of North Carolina), Catherine Zimmer (University of North Carolina)

The Impact of Labour Market Activation Policies on Insiders' and Outsiders' Low-wage Risk

\*Marco Giesselmann (German Institute for Economic Research)

Wage-related Workplace Violations: A New Dimension of the Gender Wage Gap?

\*Miruna G. Petrescu-Prahova (University of Washington), Michael W. Spiller (Cornell University),

Mark Stephen Handcock (University of Washington)

Why Do Temp Workers Work as Hard as They Do: Case of Japanese Factory Temps

\*Shinji Kojima (University of Hawaii-Manoa)

Discussant: David Brady (Social Science Research Center-Berlin)

**Regular Session. Paid and Unpaid Caring Labor**  
Mon, Aug 20 - 2:30pm - 4:10pm

Session Organizer: Kristin Smith (University of New Hampshire-Carsey Institute)

Presider: Kristin Smith (University of New Hampshire-Carsey Institute)

Habitus and Middle Class Deficits in Caregiving Support for Cancer Patients

\*Cameron Macdonald (University of Wisconsin-Madison)

Who Cares? Caregiver Well-being in Europe

\*Leah E. Ruppner (University of Hawaii-Hilo), Georgiana Bostean (University of California-Los Angeles)

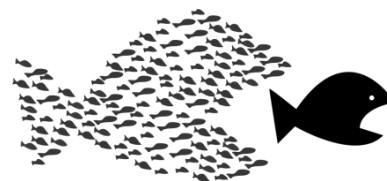
From Hostile-worlds to Connected-lives: The Purchase of Sexualized Professional Intimacy in Nursing Care

\*Lisa C. Ruchti (University of Pennsylvania)

Overqualified and Underpaid: Understanding the Mechanisms Producing the Earnings Penalty for Care Workers

\*Michelle J. Budig (University of Massachusetts), Melissa Jane Hodges (University of Massachusetts-Amherst)

Discussant: Kristin Smith (University of New Hampshire-Carsey Institute)



**Thematic Session. Worker-owned Cooperatives:  
Transformative Possibilities and Constraints**

Mon, Aug 20 - 2:30pm - 4:10pm

Session Organizer: Ramon Flecha (University of Barcelona)

Session Organizer: Marta Soler (University of Barcelona)

Session Organizer: Ofer Sharone (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

Presider: Marta Soler (University of Barcelona)

Presider: Ofer Sharone (Massachusetts Institute of Technology)

What Makes Mondragon to be a Success Story?

\*Esther Oliver (University of Barcelona)

Caja Laboral Popular (Cooperative Bank):

Institutionalizing the Mondragon Cooperatives Network

\*Iñaki Santa Cruz (Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona)

The Cleveland Evergreen Project: Success and Challenges

\*James Anderson (Evergreen Laundry)



The *Labor and Labor Movements Section* prides itself for promoting research that successfully navigates the fine line between theory-building and public sociology. Our membership draws on the full range of methodological techniques and theoretical approaches to grapple with the most pressing questions facing working people. This includes subjects such as union organizing tactics, labor and politics, the changing dynamics of the workplace, global economic transformations and everything in between. In this issue of *In Critical Solidarity*, we begin a multi-part symposium on the future of labor scholarship. Our contributors, Thomas A. Kochan and Judith Stepan-Norris, take on the issue of what it *should* look like. If you are interested in contributing a unique idea for this symposium, or an idea for another one altogether, please forward your idea to the editor: mam726@gmail.com.

**Needed: Research on the big challenges facing labor today**

**Thomas A. Kochan**

**MIT Institute for Work and Employment Research**

The greatest challenge facing the labor movement today can be summarized in two words: survival and rebirth. Researchers need to recognize the dire straits of labor in shaping their research questions and agendas. Elsewhere I've laid out my views of what labor needs to do to survive and redefine its role (Kochan, 2005; 141-74.) Here I will simply summarize those views in hopes that researchers will start testing these ideas.

1. The organizing model is broken and needs fundamental overhaul. No rational person would invent an organizing model that requires 50 percent plus one worker to join a union in order to get one new member! Moreover, the current organizing model depends on workers to be deeply dissatisfied with their employer and willing to take all the risks associated with supporting an organizing drive in the face of what Ferguson's (2008) study shows is a less than 10 percent likelihood of being successful if the employer opposes the union. Then once organized, membership for all but craft unions and some professional unions only lasts as long as the job lasts. Changing employers results in the loss of this member and the evidence suggests he or she is no easier (perhaps even harder) to organize a second time than the first.

This model will not produce resurgence. Workers do not respond to solely a negative argument for why they should join an organization. They need some positive vision, an instrumental reason, and ease of access to join. The key research question therefore has to be what alternative organizing strategies or models are viable and likely to produce new members. My view is that a new model has to focus on organizing/recruiting individual (not requiring major vote in a specified bargaining unit) new members and attracting and retaining them for life (or at least their full working careers).

2. Unions need new sources of power to generate sustainable improvements in wages and other terms and conditions of employment. The strike threat is no longer a significant source of power; in fact the evidence goes the other way—strikes are defensive

last resorts to try to reduce the size of concessions employers seek to impose. Today the key sources of power needed to improve wages on a sustained basis are (1) knowledge and skills, (2) the ability to exit a bad job/employer and take one's skills to a competing employer, and (3) coalitions and networks that can be counted on to support political and job-related union initiated actions. Unions need to become the chief suppliers of highly skilled, well trained, and reliable workers. They also need to serve as effective labor market intermediaries—helping workers move to where better opportunities exist. Doing so will both have direct benefits for mobile workers and indirect benefits for all by pressuring employers to upgrade employment conditions to reduce turnover.

3. The definition of the “labor movement” needs to expand to include all organizational and collective forms of worker advocacy. This includes traditional unions with permanent collective bargaining relationships with specific employers, professional associations that provide education, certification, or other labor market services to members of their occupation, community, ethnic, immigrant, and/or religious groups that provide social and political services to workers in need, NGOs that pressure employers to upgrade labor standards, etc. Researchers would do a great service by counting the number of people served in these different ways with different forms of advocacy and assessing the effectiveness of these alternative organizational forms and advocacy processes.

#### References:

Ferguson, John-Paul, “The Eyes of the Needle: A Sequential Model of Union Organizing Drives, 1999-2004.,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, 62, 1, 2008, 3-21.

Kochan, Thomas A. *Restoring the American Dream: A working families' agenda for America*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005.

---

## *Understanding the connection between labor and inequality*

**Judith Stepan-Norris**  
**University of California – Irvine**

---

As I contemplate a message to the Labor and Labor Movements Section membership, it's hard to imagine a more challenging, puzzling, and opportune time for our efforts. The housing bubble of 2008 and ensuing

economic downturn has made the public more aware of the nation's growing inequality and its consequences. At the same time, union membership has remained at a steady low level (around 7% of private-sector workers). A few large labor unions have figured prominently in the debates over health care and budget cuts, but for the most part organized labor has remained politically marginal, with anti-union governors pushing for further "right to work" restrictions. How can sociologists reconcile the increased need for organized labor and a voice for fair treatment at work with the passionate anti-union view that is (again) gaining ground?

On a daily basis, we hear about rising inequality: the Occupy Wall Street movement decries the increasing fortunes of the 1%; the public higher education system struggles to provide universal access to a college education; unemployed workers watch as U.S. firms opt for job creation overseas rather than at home. On the political front, the ongoing presidential election has focused on the fairness of existing tax rates and the prospects for job creation. While reductions in state and local government revenues are clearly a main source for fiscal crises, public-sector unions are blamed and have become targets of acts and laws that seek to limit their right to collectively bargain. Yet few commentators connect rising inequality with the decline of U.S. unions. As sociologists, we focus on the factors that increase or decrease inequalities in the economic, social, and political realms. In doing so we have the opportunity and responsibility to join the debate over structural inequality.

It is especially important for Labor and Labor Movement Section members to demonstrate how unions—their existence and their disappearance—influence wage equality, health care and fairness at work. While there are many differences between specific unions and union federations, unions have the potential to powerfully impact levels of inequalities. The labor movement's strength, as represented by both organizations (labor unions) and coverage of workers in the labor force (union density) has drastically declined since the mid-1950s. It is up to us to demonstrate how this decline has affected changing levels of U.S. inequality.

With regard to economic inequality, unions have been in the forefront by negotiating with employers for higher wages and enhanced benefits, thereby raising the economic well-being of working people. Unions also have opportunities to negotiate working conditions, and to wrestle some workplace control away from employers, thereby democratizing workers' everyday experiences in their places of work. While some unions may not succeed in these goals, without unions workers are not assured of *any* say in

workplace conditions and procedures. Unions thus have the potential to be a democratizing effect in the workplace.

Sometimes unions work to reduce racial, ethnic and gender inequalities. These groups are better represented among union membership than they were in the past. The gap between union membership rates for men and women has narrowed in recent decades, and currently, black men are more likely than white men to be members. The increase in wages that union workers, including women and under representative minorities, receive from membership is substantial. Union representation for underrepresented groups enhances the status and power of those groups, but their further incorporation into leadership positions would strengthen their standing even further.

Furthermore, unions provide a counterweight to corporate interests in the political realm. Many unions are active in both electoral and "social movement type" politics and some participate in coalitions that enhance workers' political clout. Without union participation in politics, our political process would be even more one-sided. Yet the ability of public unions (which represent approximately 37% of public employees) to negotiate with employers has recently been challenged in many states.

The stakes are high. Labor unions are the largest organizations of working people in the country. Their decline, due to increasing constraints and their disappearances through mergers and disbandings, will have important negative consequences for inequalities as well as for workers' everyday experiences in their workplaces and in their associational lives.

Given this malaise, what are the most pressing questions scholars of labor and labor movements might address? First, research should demonstrate how the presence (or absence) of unions matters in the twenty-first century. How do unions and union federations continue to affect workers in their everyday work lives and in their lives as citizens? Second, how does the strength of the labor movement affect how workers fare overall? Which union federations, unions, and union policies are associated with the reduction of various societal inequalities? What is the likelihood of increased inequalities as unions decline? Which inequalities in particular will increase first and why?

In order to appreciate how the decline of labor unions continues to matter, we need a strong grasp of how past unions have impacted inequalities. Yet considerable gaps in our knowledge remain. As Caleb Southworth and I (*Annual Review of Sociology* 2009) have argued, much of our knowledge is based on aggregate analyses. Yet unions exhibit considerable

variation in their strategies, policies, and goals. Disaggregate analyses are necessary. It is likely that the disappearance of some unions will have a different impact than the disappearance of others. We also continue to know little about variation in union collective bargaining success and union democracy over time. These variations also have implications for the impact of a particular union's disappearance.

Lastly, I would like to applaud the efforts of the members of our section who have encouraged labor practitioner/scholar collaboration. Several past organizational initiatives have brought Sociologists together with labor leaders and activists to discuss common interests and particular needs. Another such initiative (Labor Research and Action Network) is in the works with the aim of discussing big ideas and collaborating on specific campaigns. Such initiatives deserve our attention and participation.

The Labor and Labor Movements Section has grown and thrived over the last decade. Our section has distinguished itself by combining strong theoretical frameworks and methodologies with its mission of studying labor unions and reducing societal inequalities. I am optimistic that our future work will continue to emphasize how unions matter for inequality and the importance of their survival.



## The Wisconsin recall

A debate

The failed recall of Wisconsin's governor Scott Walker sparked a heated debate in the world of progressive online magazines and blogs over the relationship between unions and politics, and in particular the Democratic Party. These are some of the stand-out examples from that exchange in the order that they appeared.

---

### **Wisconsin Democrats get dealt a bitter blow in courageous battle**

Gary Younge

---

In a sermon, which would later serve as a title for Barack Obama's bestselling book, his former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, described a painting called Hope by

GF Watts. It depicted a bruised and battered woman who used the single string she had on her harp to make holy music. "To take the one string you have left and to have the audacity to hope," said Wright.

When organized labour mounted the challenge to recall Wisconsin's Republican governor, Scott Walker, they were certainly audacious. There have only been two recalls in the history of the country and the national Democratic party did not want them to do it and made clear they would provide little in the way of support for it. They knew Scott Walker would be well-funded and have national backing. They did it anyway. And they lost.

There is no masking the fact that their defeat is a bitter blow. Before the recall they could claim that Walker ran on false pretenses and people did not know what they were getting. Now he has a record and the people of Wisconsin voted for it anyway. He has a clear mandate not just to run the state – he had that already – but to step up his attacks on them.

One might argue whether their recall effort was a strategic error, but given the number of people they mobilized and the degree to which they had Republicans rattled right down to the wire, suggests it was not reckless. If audacity implies anything it is boldness and daring. They came. They fought. And they were conquered.

To insist that the fight should not have been joined one would not only need 20-20 hindsight. (Unions in Ohio defeated anti-union measures in November and six months ago Walker looked far more vulnerable). One would also have to imagine a scenario in which labour saw its rights being comprehensively undermined and did not try every possible legitimate means to protect them.

In the words of Alexis Tsipiras, the leader of the Greek party Syriza, which is leading the battle against austerity in that country: "Defeat is the battle that isn't waged, and when someone fights there is the big chance of winning; and we are fighting this to win. Lost battles are battles that are not fought." And while that does not transform defeat into victory it does provide for useful lessons that could not have been learned in the absence of the struggle itself.

First, the Republicans have a get-out-the vote operation that is every bit as dynamic as those of the Democrats and organised labour. Recall supporters made themselves believe that those huge turnouts in Democratic areas were all for them when it was actually Republicans coming out behind enemy lines.

Second, money matters and the Republicans have a lot of it. Walker outspent Barrett by seven to one, with most of it coming from outside the state. This is a very corrupting fact about American politics, particularly since Citizens United. But it is a fact nonetheless. So either unions and grassroots organisations don't participate in the electoral process but work outside it to change the debate and mobilize public opinion – like Occupy Wall Street – or they have to find money from somewhere.

Third, if progressives are looking for political support they should look down to the grassroots, not up to the Democratic party. Rhetorically Obama was with them all the way. Not only was he all about the audacity of hope. But in his campaign he would quote the late poet and essayist June Jordan, with an empowering message about the need for political activism: "We were the ones we are waiting for."

Wisconsin radicals could have been waiting for him until the cows in this dairy state came home. He wasn't coming. The fierce urgency of now had given way to the tepid ambivalence until November. He could have sent Joe Biden as a show of solidarity. Instead they kept their distance.

True, the recall was a risk. But victory against Walker on Tuesday night was no less likely than Obama's victory four years ago. Spineless as this was, few of the activists to whom I spoke believed his involvement would have been decisive, or raised his absence as a problem even if most would have liked him to come.

If this was less than audacious given the defeat it transpired to be electorally savvy. For while it hurt labour, both locally and possibly nationally, it did not hurt Obama. Walker's victory does not translate into a defeat for Obama in November. The same exit pollsters that gave Walker a victory also showed Obama defeating Romney by nine points.

Finally the Tom Barrett and the Democrats ran a confused and unconvincing campaign. Everybody knew what Walker stood for even if they didn't like it: small government, weak unions and low taxes.

It was never quite clear what Barrett stood for apart from that he was not Walker. His message meandered from corruption among Walker's former aides, to the call for a more consensual leadership style from Madison. In 2010 that would have been all well and good. But the recall was prompted for a reason – Walker's attacks on trade unions as a foil for balancing the budget. Yet Barrett did not stand as a defender of



labour and did not produce a credible, progressive response to the state's fiscal problems.

Tom Barrett was the John Kerry of Wisconsin. In the five days I've been reporting from the state I have yet to meet a single person who voted for him as opposed to against Walker. In the end this was just not enough. His failure to give some vision for what Wisconsin under his stewardship would look like could not win over the coveted independents or sufficiently inspire his base.

When it came down to it, the people of Wisconsin wanted more than the absence of Scott Walker. They wanted the presence of an alternative.

Originally published at *The Guardian*:  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/cifamerica/2012/jun/06/wisconsin-democrats-come-up-empty>

## ***Walker's victory, un-sugar-coated***

**Doug Henwood**

Democrats and labor types are coming up with a lot of excuses for Scott Walker's victory in Wisconsin. Not all are worthless. But the excuse-making impulse should be beaten down with heavy sticks.

Yes, money mattered. Enormous amounts of cash poured in, mainly from right-wing tycoons, to support Walker's effort to snuff public employee unions. While these sorts of tycoons—outside the Wall Street/Fortune 500 establishment—have long been the funding base for right-wing politics, they seem to have grown in wealth, number, consciousness, and mobilization since their days funding the John Birch Society and the Goldwater movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

But lingering too long on the money explanation is too easy. Several issues must be stared down. One is the horrible mistake of channeling a popular uprising into electoral politics. As I wrote almost a year ago:

"It's the same damn story over and over. The state AFL-CIO chooses litigation and electoral politics over popular action, which dissolves everything into mush. Meanwhile, the right is vicious, crafty, and

uncompromising. Guess who wins that sort of confrontation?"

Please prove me wrong someday, you sad American "left."

At this point, few things would make me happier to say than I'd been proven wrong. But I wasn't.

There were several things wrong with the electoral strategy (beyond, that is, the weakness of electoral strategies to begin with). Barrett was an extremely weak candidate who'd already once lost to Walker (though by a slightly *narrower* margin than this time). Potentially stronger candidates like Russ Feingold refused to run, probably out of fear of these results. And the bar was very high for a recall. Only 19 states have recall provisions, and Walker was just the third governor to face one. Well over half of Wisconsin voters think that recalls should be reserved only for misconduct—and less than a third approve of recalls for any reason other than misconduct.

Suppose instead that the unions had supported a popular campaign—media, door knocking, phone calling—to agitate, educate, and organize on the importance of the labor movement to the maintenance of living standards? If they'd made an argument, broadly and repeatedly, that Walker's agenda was an attack on the wages and benefits of the majority of the population? That it was designed to remove organized opposition to the power of right-wing money in politics? That would have been more fruitful than this major defeat.

It *is* a defeat. It is not, as that idiot Ed Schultz said on MSNBC last night, an opportunity for regroupment. (Didn't hear it myself, but it was reported by a reliable source on the Twitter.) Because in the wise and deservedly famous words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, "When you strike at a king, you must kill him." When you don't, you look like a fool if you're lucky. More likely, you'll find your head in a noose.

And as much as it hurts to admit this, labor unions just aren't very popular. In Gallup's annual poll on confidence in institutions, unions score close to the bottom of the list, barely above big business and HMOs but behind banks. More Americans—42%—would like to see unions have less influence, and just 25% would like to see them have more. Despite a massive financial crisis and a dismal job market, approval of unions is close to an all-time low in the 75 years Gallup has been asking the question. A major reason for this is that twice as many people (68%) think that unions help mostly their members as think

they help the broader population (34%). Amazingly, in Wisconsin, while only about 30% of union members voted for Walker, nearly half of those living in union households but not themselves union members voted for him (Union voters ≠ union households). In other words, apparently union members aren't even able to convince their spouses that the things are worth all that much.

A major reason for the perception that unions mostly help insiders is that it's true. Though unions sometimes help out in living wage campaigns, they're too interested in their own wages and benefits and not the needs of the broader working class. Public sector workers rarely make common cause with the consumers of public services, be they schools, health care, or transit.

Since 2000, unions have given over \$700 million to Democrats—\$45 million of it this year alone. What do they have to show for it? Imagine if they'd spent that sort of money, say, lobbying for single-payer day-in, day-out, everywhere.

So what now? Most labor people, including some fairly radical ones, detest Bob Fitch's analysis of labor's torpor. By all means, read his book *Solidarity for Sale* for the full analysis. But a taste of it can be gotten here, from his interview with Michael Yates of *Monthly Review*. A choice excerpt:

“Essentially, the American labor movement consists of 20,000 semi-autonomous local unions. Like feudal vassals, local leaders get their exclusive jurisdiction from a higher level organization and pass on a share of their dues. The ordinary members are like the serfs who pay compulsory dues and come with the territory. The union bosses control jobs—staff jobs or hiring hall jobs—the coin of the political realm. Those who get the jobs—the clients—give back their unconditional loyalty. The politics of loyalty produces, systematically, poles of corruption and apathy. The privileged minority who turn the union into their personal business. And the vast majority who ignore the union as none of their business.”

Bob thought that the whole model of American unionism, in which unions were given exclusive rights to bargain over contracts in closed shops, was a major long-term source of weakness. I find it persuasive; many don't. But whatever you think of that analysis of the past is rapidly becoming irrelevant. Collective bargaining has mostly disappeared in the private sector, and now looks doomed in the public sector. There are something like 23 states with Republican governors and legislative majorities ready to imitate Walker who will be emboldened by his victory. And

there are a lot of Dems ready to do a Walker Lite. If they don't disappear, public sector unions will soon become powerless.

That means that if unions ever want to turn things around—and I'm old-fashioned enough to believe that we'll never have a better society without a reborn labor movement—they have to learn to operate in this new reality. Which means learning to act politically, to agitate on behalf of the entire working class and not just a privileged subset with membership cards.

Originally published at the *Left Business Observer*: <http://lbo-news.com/2012/06/06/walkers-victory-un-sugar-coated/>

---

## ***What labor's loss in Wisconsin does—and doesn't—mean***

**David Moberg**

---

There's no point mincing words: By rejecting the recall of Republican Gov. Scott Walker, Wisconsin voters dealt a nasty blow to organized labor and progressives in the state and beyond.

That was especially true since Wisconsin unions and liberals picked this particular fight, even if it was a justifiable but politically risky response to the governor taking away the rights of public workers.

Quickly, right-wing leaders and commentators—and even some liberals—declared the vote the death knell of unions, especially in the public sector, and a public legitimization of hard-line anti-union strategies. And it could turn into a PATCO moment—when Ronald Reagan fired striking air traffic controllers—if organized labor and its allies fail to launch an effective counter-attack on behalf of not only labor rights but more broadly economic justice and democracy.

But single victories rarely translate into triumphal waves. The right reads too much into their win. Few Republican governors would like to undergo the protests Walker has faced, even if they keep their office.



Yet a strong trend has emerged among both Democrats and Republicans toward attacking public employees, following the successful decades-long offensive against private sector unions. And the Supreme Court's *Citizens United* decision will keep the floodgates open to the gush of money from right-wing billionaires that gave Walker an overwhelming financial edge (perhaps eight to one).

The recall vote "was not the end of something but the beginning," AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said, referring to a "new model" of labor and community mobilization, a new determination "to hold politicians accountable," and an emerging movement for economic justice.

Labor and its progressive allies are hardly dead after Tuesday, but they need to take the defeat seriously. They could start by acknowledging that many unions have failed to educate and energize their own members adequately and that much of the public, including even theoretically friendly politicians, do not appreciate—or feel any benefit from—a shrinking, sometimes insular movement.

In these hostile times, unions need to pre-emptively create broad coalitions—such as Wisconsin formed in reaction to Walker—and more means of outreach to educate the public, especially the working class, about how our society fails to work for the 99 percent and why unions still play a crucial role at work and in politics.

Some implications of the recall vote are murky because the factors in the election are complex. For example, Walker kept his office by a larger margin than when he first won a year and a half ago, but Republicans lost control of the state Senate when one Democrat won in a recall contest. (That opens up a way to stop much of Walker's agenda, but the Senate

will probably not meet until next year.) That slightly tempers the loss.

Also, although labor unions and many supporters saw the recall as a referendum on labor rights, Democrats and Barrett himself downplayed public workers' rights in the recall battles, with both parties emphasizing other issues. That makes the meaning of the vote less clear—in contrast with voters' strong rejection of S.B. 5's anti-labor provisions in Ohio.

Also, 60 percent of voters in exit polls said they thought a recall was appropriate only in cases of misconduct. That reluctance to recall showed up in last year's Senate campaigns and constitutes one of the main reasons Walker won.

Wisconsin voters were deeply divided on public workers' union rights and somewhat at odds with themselves. In exit polls, by 51 to 45 percent, voters expressed a favorable view of public employee unions, but by almost inverse divisions—52 to 47 percent—they approved both limiting collective bargaining and how Walker handled collective bargaining. Nationally, however, a *New York Times* poll in February 2011 found Americans opposed taking away collective bargaining rights by 60 to 33 percent.

Even though the anti-Walker movement lost this fight, it is still alive as a movement, including new or revitalized organizations like We Are Wisconsin and Milwaukee-based Wisconsin Jobs Now.

"The story of Wisconsin is the story of fighting back and the force of mass offensives," says SEIU Healthcare Wisconsin Vice President Bruce Colburn. "Wisconsin set a good example of that willingness to take on that fight," possibly giving other, less ideological governors than Walker pause about following his path.

But membership in public employee unions has dropped. The *Wall Street Journal* reports AFSCME in Wisconsin has declined from 62,818 in March 2011 to 28,745 in February 2012, though AFSCME disputes those numbers. Meanwhile, SEIU has lost some government members and is likely to lose many more in 2014 when its contract with the University of Wisconsin expires, and with it, their right to bargain a new contract. So far, few unions have re-organized their workplaces to prepare workers to act collectively even without bargaining.

The right also used Wisconsin as a test for developing its political "ground game," which some reports

described as rivaling labor's own infrastructure. While some pundits see dangers that Obama could now lose Wisconsin, which he won by a large margin over John McCain in 2008, the exit polls showed Obama favored over Romney by 51 to 44 percent. The presidential race will likely be tight, but Walker's victory does not pose a great setback for Obama, except for motivating the far right and for stimulating development of field operations.

Unlike the Republicans, the national Democrats and Obama stayed relatively distant—with the president's main, pathetic role consisting of sending out a tweet at the last minute in support of Barrett. This strategy of avoiding an intensely felt but probably losing candidacy may be smart, if not particularly principled, politics on the part of Team Obama, but to the extent that it sets back labor unions, it hurts Democratic electoral prospects.

More important to the state of the union, if not the president's campaign, declining unions are implicated in rising inequality, worse health, and weakened democracy.

Do even union members realize that? Searching the beer and brat leftovers of Tuesday night for clues, the answer is yes—and no.

Union members and their households turned out only somewhat more forcefully to vote than non-union voters. According to exit polls, 17 percent of voters were union members, though in 2011 they constituted about 13 percent of the state's workforce, and they voted 71 percent for Barrett, 28 percent for Walker.

According to a Hart Research poll of union members for the AFL-CIO, 85 percent of public-sector union members voted for Barrett, 15 percent for Walker. Private-sector union members voted 69 to 31 for Barrett (for a combined union member tally of 75 to 25 percent split). Voters from households with a union member—32 percent of the electorate, according to the exit polls—cast 62 percent of their ballots for Barrett, compared to 39 percent for the Democrat from households with no union member.

Considering Walker's extreme actions against public union members and the protests against him, the private-sector unionist vote does not show unusually strong support for the recall. But Hart found that 79 percent of private-sector union members believe in public workers' right to bargain collectively—not too bad but not overwhelming solidarity.

Measured against usual performance, public workers were, not surprisingly, strongly for the recall. While some association with a union seemed to have significantly influenced voters to oppose Walker, a large bloc of union members was not moved by Walker's attack on unions—including people who object to unions, hold a right-wing worldview, vote on specific social issues or otherwise part company with their union.

The weak support for the anti-Walker campaign from other, non-union workers is more of a problem, since they form a bigger share of the voters.

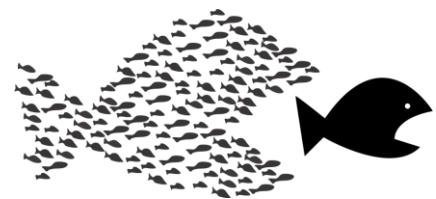
Overall, Barrett won a few distinct groups of voters—the poor, the very educated, the young, minorities, single women (and union members). He lost the wealthy. He also lost the non-college educated (56 to 43 percent), and he split whites making \$50,000 or less evenly. But despite attempts to work with these voters, such as the AFL-CIO's Working America organization, many of these non-union but working-class voters simply don't identify with the labor movement.

Looking ahead, both sides are geared up for the November elections, and voters are energized, says Rob Zerban, challenger to Republican budget chair Paul Ryan in the southeast corner of the state.

Though encouraged by the state Senate recall victory within the Congressional district where he is running, Zerban says, "The races are different. But anytime there is more participation by Democrats, it's a good sign." He does not believe Walker's victory will hurt his campaign.

The recall fallout can—and must—be contained. But it will take more serious member education, mobilization and the creation of meaningful coalitions that reach out more broadly than has happened before.

Originally published at *In These Times*:  
[http://www.inthesetimes.com/working/entry/13340/what\\_labors\\_loss\\_in\\_wisconsin\\_doesand\\_doesntmean/](http://www.inthesetimes.com/working/entry/13340/what_labors_loss_in_wisconsin_doesand_doesntmean/)



---

## *Why did so many workers vote for Walker?*

**Jim Cavanaugh**

---

The results of the Wisconsin recall election were very similar to the first run of this matchup in November 2010, when Scott Walker beat Tom Barrett. This means that the radical right agenda of the GOPers elected in 2010 has not turned off the voters.

How can a government of the 1% receive so much support from the 99%?

In the case of the Wisconsin election, there's been a lot of finger pointing and speculation post-election: Walker used loose campaign finance rules to overwhelm Barrett financially; Obama didn't come to Wisconsin; unions didn't force the collective bargaining issue front and center. And so on.

Yet pre-election polling and Election Day exit polling showed that the vast majority of voters had taken their positions months before the serious campaigning. So, the money and the celebrities made little difference. And people were already as informed on the issues as they wanted to be.

The fact is the radical right is very good at propaganda. They have used race and cultural issues to hold their base and they have used anti-government rhetoric in an era of frustrated economic hopes and resentment to expand that base to majority status.

Walker, even more so than in 2010, ran against Milwaukee and Madison.

His negative ads against Milwaukee Mayor Barrett were actually negative ads against the mayor's city, equating it with high unemployment, rising property taxes, crime, and poverty. This is the tried-and-true GOP race card because everybody knows Milwaukee has a substantial population of dark-skinned people.

And Madison, of course, is the state capital where privileged bureaucrats earn too much, enjoy too rich benefits, and do too little work.

Walker did not dream up this argument. Even before the 2010 election, on-the-ground research from a University of Wisconsin professor showed that ordinary Wisconsinites outside of Madison had a very negative view of this city of large government office buildings, a fairly high standard of living, and liberal politics. Walker simply exploited an existing bias.

Exit polling showed Walker won the votes of a majority of non-college graduates, along with way too many union households (around 38 percent) in both 2010 and 2012.

Meanwhile, college graduates—the ever-shrinking middle-income households—and the very poor did not vote for Walker.

In other words, way too much of the working class voted for Walker.

We progressive labor people might smugly shake our heads and ask, how can these people vote against their own interests? While some of them are serious cultural conservatives or racists, probably a majority legitimately see themselves as actually voting in their own self interest.

People struggling to get by on \$12-15 an hour have to watch every penny. And the Republican message of small government and low taxes resonates every time a worker pays sales tax, property tax, or income tax.

And thanks in part to a gullible or lazy media which dutifully and uncritically repeats GOP propaganda about the eventual demise of Social Security and Medicare, struggling workers have a jaundiced view of their payroll taxes. The Republicans, with their expensive wars and tax giveaways for the wealthy, are certainly not the party of small government and fiscal responsibility, but they have sold their message well.

If progressives hope to regain governing power, they have to win back the “unfriendlies” in the working class, as Mike Amato correctly points out [1]. They might not be able to garner the support of the devoted racists and cultural conservatives, but they can and must win the loyalty of the others.

We can get started right away with the issue of taxes. Not by promising tax cuts, but rather tax fairness. At every level of government in the United States our tax structure is one of the most regressive in the world.

Obama, to his credit, has made some effort to address this by calling for the Buffet rule, which would lift taxes on millionaires, and an end to the Bush tax cuts for the

super-rich. Meanwhile, Bill Clinton (who I can now publicly admit I could never bring myself to vote for) undermines this push by giving the Republican argument that rolling back these tax cuts would hurt the economy.

As usual, Democrats do not seem to have a coherent and consistent philosophy on matters of important public policy. Nor do they appear to have a plan beyond the next election.

The Republicans clearly do.

Unions and other progressives must push the Democrats or some other vehicle to pursue a coherent and consistent pro-working class agenda, or we will continue to be governed by Walker types and to wring our hands over this state of affairs.

Originally published at *Labor Notes*:  
<http://labornotes.org/blogs/2012/06/why-did-so-many-workers-vote-walker>

---

## *Accountability in defeat in Wis.*

**Matthew Rothschild**

---

Spare me the spin. This was a whopping.

After sixteen months of the most historic and exciting citizens' uprising that I've ever been a part of in my thirty-five years of progressive activism and journalism, we're left with this disaster.

Scott Walker is governor for another two and a half years.

He claims vindication for his rightist onslaught.

The national rightwing media is carrying him around on their shoulders.

And the Koch Brothers are popping the expensive champagne.

Meanwhile, the movement—a real giant grassroots movement, which flooded the capitol square with more

than 100,000 people and which gathered a million recall signatures—is disintegrating.

Actually, it began to disintegrate the moment the leaders (and who were they, exactly?) decided to pour everything into the Democratic Party channels rather than explore the full potential of the power that was latent but present in the streets back in February and March of 2011.

There were both strategic and procedural blunders that need to be accounted for.

Procedurally, decisions were made (again, who made them?) in a very undemocratic way. Here we had 100,000 people storming the square but there was no effort to include them in any meaningful—or even symbolic—decision-making process. No voice votes, no show of hands, no breaking up into smaller groups and reconvening with a set of demands and desires that flowed from below, no people's mic ala the Occupy Movement.

We gathered at noon every day, we gathered every night, and we massed on the weekends, but then the decision was made (by whom?) to stop marching and essentially to go back to our home districts and throw all our energies into recalling state senators. I remember being at a protest and being told to do so from the podium.

This has had at least four detrimental effects.

First, it diffused the protests not only geographically but emotionally.

Second, it destroyed the lesson that you can exercise power outside the electoral arena.

Third, it fed the assumption that the Democratic Party was the be all and end all.

And fourth, it took the mass power off the streets when it was needed there in case calamity struck.



Calamity did strike when the Republicans railroaded the bill through.

Calamity did strike when the state supreme court validated the decision in the most corrupt decision since *Bush v. Gore*.

Calamity did strike when the bill finally was implemented in August.

Calamity did strike when Waukesha County clerk Kathy Nickolaus all of a sudden found 14,000 missing votes in the state supreme court race to throw it to David Prosser.

But the people by then were dispersed.

There were many opportunities available to challenge Walker's policies with mass civil disobedience.

One was when the Department of Administration refused to allow the occupation of the capitol to continue.

Another was when the Department of Administration closed the capitol doors.

And certainly when the bill was shoved through, that was an occasion to call for mass civil disobedience.

But the call never came.

Nor were more creative strategies tried. The Teamsters with their 18 wheelers, whose support was so emboldening, could have driven down Interstate 90 and 94 at 45 mph all day long for a week's time to demonstrate that workers in Wisconsin weren't going to take this lying down.

No coordinated workplace strategies were adopted.

Every union in the state could have caught the blue flu, so that workers in one trade after another would call in sick on alternating days.

Or unions could have told their members simply to "work to rule"—doing the bare minimum that their contracts required.

But none of these options were taken, and the only channel that all of the people's energy was poured into was the very narrow and murky channel of the Democratic Party.

There was a failure of imagination, and a failure of nerve, and a failure of process.

There also was naivete. I was at a meeting of progressive activists and legislators shortly after Walker won the first time, and one of the legislators warned us that something terrible was going to come down soon. I asked how the unions were responding, and the legislator said, "They're trying to hire the best Republican lobbyists they can find."

They didn't understand that Walker and the Fitzgeralds didn't want to horse trade; they wanted to massacre.



Tactical blunders continued in the lead up to the recall. Walker was allowed to run one commercial after another from Thanksgiving to April Fool's Day with barely a counter from labor or the Democrats. Where was the national AFL with its treasury during this time? This was the biggest pitched battle against workers, and the AFL-CIO barely showed up. Where was the Democratic Governors Association? Where was the DNC?

Then the union leadership handpicked Kathleen Falk, even though there was no groundswell of support for her whatsoever, a choice that embittered much of the movement's base and proved unpopular on primary day.

And finally, Barack Obama never deigned to make an appearance, literally mailing it in with an Election Day tweet.

Yes, Walker had more money than Croesus, but come on!

And fundamentally, progressives and unionists in Wisconsin also have to wrestle with the obvious problem that union members, to an astonishing degree, actually voted for Walker. According to the exit

polls, 38 percent of union households in Wisconsin voted for him—even more than last time!

Something is seriously wrong with the union movement in Wisconsin when so many of its own members actually vote for the guy who's got his boot on their throats.

How can that be?

Have members become so disengaged from their unions that they don't know why they exist?

Has the education arm of the unions simply withered away?

We, all of us, in unions and out, need to start talking to people right now who don't agree with us and actively work to show them the damage that Walker and his ilk are doing to Wisconsin and to this country.

We can't stay in our womb-like refuges in Madison and listen to Stephanie Miller in the morning and watch Ed Schultz at night and call it a day.

We've got to get out there and do the work of politics, which is talking to people and opening eyes and changing minds.

We can't afford another loss like this one.

Originally published at *the Progressive*:  
[http://www.progressive.org/accountability\\_in\\_defeat\\_in\\_wis.html](http://www.progressive.org/accountability_in_defeat_in_wis.html)

---

## Getting rolled in Wisconsin

Andy Kroll

---

The revelers watched in stunned disbelief, cocktails in hand, dressed for a night to remember. On the big-screen TV a headline screamed in crimson red: "Projected Winner: Scott Walker." It was 8:49 p.m. In parts of Milwaukee, people learned that news networks had declared Wisconsin's governor the winner while still in line to cast their votes. At the election night party for Walker's opponent, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, supporters talked and cried and ordered more drinks. Barrett soon took the stage to

concede, then waded into the crowd where a distraught woman slapped him in the face.

Walker is the first governor in American history to win a recall election. His lieutenant governor, Rebecca Kleefisch, dispatched her recall challenger no less decisively. So, too, did three Republican state senators in their recall elections. Democrats avoided a GOP sweep with a win in the sixth and final senate recall vote of the season, in Wisconsin's southeastern 21st district, but that was small consolation. Put simply, Democrats and labor unions got rolled.

The results of Tuesday's elections are being heralded as the death of public-employee unions, if not the death of organized labor itself. Tuesday's results are also seen as the final chapter in the story of the populist uprising that burst into life last year in the state capital of Madison. The Cheddar Revolution, so the argument goes, was buried in a mountain of ballots.

But that burial ceremony may prove premature. Most of the conclusions of the last few days, left and right, are likely wrong.

The energy of the Wisconsin uprising was never electoral. The movement's mistake: letting itself be channeled solely into traditional politics, into the usual box of uninspired candidates and the usual line-up of debates, primaries, and general elections. The uprising was too broad and diverse to fit electoral politics comfortably. You can't play a symphony with a single instrument. Nor can you funnel the energy and outrage of a popular movement into a single race, behind a single well-worn candidate, at a time when all the money in the world from corporate "individuals" and right-wing billionaires is pouring into races like the Walker recall.

Colin Millard, an organizer at the International Brotherhood of Bridge, Structural, Ornamental, and Reinforcing Iron Workers, admitted as much on the eve of the recall. We were standing inside his storefront office in the small town of Horicon, Wisconsin. It was night outside. "The moment you start a recall," he told me, "you're playing their game by their rules."

### From Madison to Zuccotti Park and Beyond

A recap is in order.

The uprising began with Colin Millard. The date was February 11, 2011, when Walker "dropped the bomb," as he later put it, with his "budget repair" bill, which



sought to gut collective bargaining rights for most public-employee unions. Later that day, a state Democratic Party staffer who knew Millard called him and pleaded with him to organize a protest. Millard agreed, even though other unions, including the AFL-CIO, urged him to back out. Don't make a fuss, they advised. Let's call some lawmakers and urge them to oppose Walker's bill. "Fuck off," was Millard's response.

On the Sunday after Walker unveiled his bill, Millard rounded up more than 200 people and marched down Lake Street, past the John Deere factory and Dannyboy's Bar, to the home of Republican Jeff Fitzgerald, the speaker of the state Assembly and a Walker ally. Fitzgerald lived a mile or two from Millard in Horicon. "I've got a message for Scott Walker," Millard told the crowd outside Fitzgerald's house. "This is my union card and you can pry it from my cold, dead hand."

As rumors spread of more protests, Walker threatened to call out the National Guard to deal with the protesting public workers. That's when popular outrage erupted. Students marched on the state capitol, and then a local teaching assistants union led the effort to take over the capitol rotunda, transforming intermittent protests into a round-the-clock occupation. Organizers provided food, shelter, health care, day care, education, and a sense of purpose for those who had taken up residence inside the capitol.

In support of the occupiers, the daily protests outside the capitol grew into crowds of 10,000, 25,000, then upward of 100,000. People marched in the snowy streets to challenge Walker, Wisconsin Republicans, and their political donors. Tractors circled the capitol in protest, as did firefighters and cops, even though their bargaining rights had been exempted from Walker's "reform" proposals. By now, Madison had captured the nation's attention.

A two-week occupation of the capitol and months of protests didn't, however, deter Walker and Republican lawmakers. He signed his budget repair bill, known as Act 10, into law in March. But that doesn't mean the Wisconsin uprising had no effect. For one thing, the "Walkerville" occupation of the grounds outside the state capitol helped inspire the "Bloombergville" protest in New York City targeting Mayor Michael Bloomberg. That, in turn, would be a precursor to the Occupy Wall Street events of the following September and later the Occupy movement nationwide. Without Wisconsin, without the knowledge that such things could still happen in America, there might never have been an Occupy.

## Hijacking the Uprising

By the time Occupy Wall Street took off, the Wisconsin uprising had swapped its come-one-come-all organizing message for a far narrower and more traditional political mission. Over the summer of 2011, the decision was made that the energy and enthusiasm displayed in Madison should be channeled into recall elections to defeat six Republican state senators who had voted for Walker's anti-union Act 10. (Three Democratic senators would, in the end, face recall as well.) By that act, Democrats and unions hoped to wrestle control of the senate away from Walker and use that new power to block his agenda.

The Democrats won two of the 2011 recalls, one short of gaining control of the Senate, and so the Republicans clung to their majority.

What followed was more of the same, but with the ante upped. This time, the marquee race would be the recall of Walker himself. Launched last November, the grassroots campaign to recall the governor put the populist heart of the Wisconsin uprising on full display. Organizing under the United Wisconsin banner, 30,000 volunteers statewide gathered nearly one million signatures to trigger the election. The group's people-powered operation recaptured some of the spirit of the Capitol occupation, but the decision had been made: recalling Walker at the ballot box was the way forward.

The Walker recall effort would, in fact, splinter the masses of anti-Walker protesters. Many progressives and most of the state's labor unions rallied behind former Dane County executive Kathleen Falk who, in January 2012, announced her intent to challenge Walker. Tom Barrett, who had lost the governor's race to Walker in 2010, didn't announce his candidacy until late March, his entry pitting Democrat against Democrat, his handful of union endorsements pitting labor against labor. Unions pumped \$4 million into helping Falk clinch the Democratic nomination. In the end, though, it wasn't close: Barrett stomped her in the May 8th primary by 24 percentage points.

By now, the Madison movement was the captive of ordinary Democratic politics in the state. After all, Barrett was hardly a candidate of the uprising. People who had protested in the streets and slept in the capitol groused about his uninspired record on workers' rights and public education. He never inspired or unified the movement that had made a recall possible -- and it showed on Election Day: Walker beat Barrett by seven percentage points, almost his exact margin of victory in 2010. Democrats and their union

allies needed to win over new voters and old enemies; by all accounts they failed.

And had Barrett by some miracle won, after a few days of celebration and self-congratulation, those in the Madison movement would have found themselves in the same box, in the same broken system, with little sense of what to do and, in a Barrett governorship, little hope. Win or lose, there was loss written all over the recall decision.

### The Fate of the Uprising

The takeaway from Walker's decisive win on Tuesday is not that Wisconsin's new populist movement is dead. It's that such a movement does not fit comfortably into the present political/electoral system, stuffed as it is with corporate money, overflowing with bizarre ads and media horse-race-manship. Its members' beliefs are too diverse to be confined comfortably in what American electoral politics has become. It simply couldn't be squeezed into a system that stifles and, in some cases, silences the kinds of voices and energies it possessed.

The post-election challenge for the members of Wisconsin's uprising is finding a new way to fight for and achieve needed change without simply pinning their hopes on a candidate or an election. After all, that's part of what absorbed the nation when a bunch of students first moved into the Wisconsin state capitol and wouldn't go home, or when a ragtag crew of protesters camped out in lower Manhattan's Zuccotti Park and wouldn't leave either. In both cases, they had harnessed the outrage felt by so many Americans for a cause other than what's usually called "politics" in this country.

And they were successful -- even in the most traditional terms; that is, both movements affected traditional politics most strongly when they weren't part of it. The Occupy movement, for all its flaws, moved even mainstream political discourse away from austerity and deficit slashing and toward the issues of income inequality and the hollowing out of the American middle and working classes.

Avoiding politics as we know it with an almost religious fervor, Occupy still managed to put its stamp on national political fights. Last October, for instance, Ohioans voted overwhelmingly to repeal SB 5, a law that curbed collective bargaining rights for all public-employee unions. Occupy's "We are the 99%" message reverberated through Ohio, and the volunteers who blitzed the state successfully drew on Occupy themes to make their case for the law's

repeal. Mary Kay Henry, president of the Service Employees International Union, which spent \$500,000 in Ohio fighting SB 5, told me at the time, "Every conversation was in the context of the 99% and the 1%, this discussion sparked by Occupy Wall Street."

The money that flowed into Walker's recall fight speaks loudly to the disadvantages a Wisconsin-like movement faces within the walls of electoral politics and the need for it to resist being confined there. On the post-*Citizens United* playing field, the unlimited amounts of the money that rose to the top of this society in recent decades, as the 1% definitively separated itself from the 99%, can be reinvested in preserving the world as it is and electing those who will make it even more amenable. The advantage invariably goes corporate; it goes Republican.

Historically, the Republicans have long been the party of big business, of multinational corporations, of wealthy, union-hating donors like Las Vegas casino mogul Sheldon Adelson and Amway heir Dick DeVos - - and in recent decades the Democrats have followed in their wake sweeping up the crumbs (or worse). And here's the reality of a deeply corrupt system: unless Congress and state legislators act to patch up their tattered campaign finance rulebooks, the same crew with the same money will continue to dominate the political wars. (And any movement that puts its own money on changing those rules is probably in deep trouble.)

In the wake of the recall losses, the people of Wisconsin's uprising must ask themselves: Where can they make an impact outside of politics? The power of nonviolent action to create social and economic change is well documented, most notably by Jonathan Schell in his classic book *The Unconquerable World*. The men and women in Schell's invaluable history -- Mohandas Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr. and his civil rights fighters, the Czech dissident Vaclav Havel, and so many others -- can serve as guides to a path to change that doesn't require recall elections. Already mainstays of the Madison protests have suggested campaigns to refuse to spend money with businesses that support Walker. "Hit 'em where it hurts. Pocketbooks," C.J. Terrell, one of the Capitol occupiers, recently wrote on Facebook.

Wisconsinites could also turn to one of their own: Robert "Fightin' Bob" La Follette. He created his own band of "insurgents" within the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Republican Party. Together they formed the Progressive Party, which fought for workers' rights, guarded civil liberties, and worked to squeeze corruption out of government.

Ultimately, however, the decision on what comes next rests in the hands of those who inspired and powered the Wisconsin uprising. And with an emboldened Governor Walker, there should be no shortage of reasons to fight back in the next two years. But success, as Tuesday's election made clear, isn't likely to come the traditional way. It will, of course, involve unions; it might draw on state and local political parties. But in the end, it's in the hands of the people again, as it was in February 2011.

The future they want is theirs to decide.

Originally published at *Tomdispatch*:

[http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175556/tomgram:\\_a\\_ndy\\_kroll,\\_how\\_the\\_wisconsin\\_uprising\\_got\\_hijacked/](http://www.tomdispatch.com/post/175556/tomgram:_a_ndy_kroll,_how_the_wisconsin_uprising_got_hijacked/)

## Left anti-unionism?

GORDON LAFER

In the days following the Wisconsin election, a number of progressive journalists responded to the heartbreaking defeat by venting their anger at a surprising target: the very unions that Scott Walker waged war on. Doug Henwood in *Left Business Observer*, Matt Rothschild in *The Progressive* and Andy Kroll of *Mother Jones* each have different analyses of what went wrong, but all agree that unions were guilty of what Henwood terms the “horrible mistake of channeling a popular uprising into electoral politics.”

The Wisconsin movement “began to disintegrate the moment the leaders decided to pour everything into the Democratic Party,” Rothschild explains. That decision, he argues, “destroyed the lesson that you can exercise power outside the electoral arena.” Indeed, Kroll insists that the electoral strategy would have been a “loss” even if Walker had been defeated, since “the Madison movement would have found themselves in...the same broken system, with...little hope.”

Really? The limitations of electoral politics are obvious, but the assumption that electoral strategies per se are always wrong is hard to fathom. The loss in Wisconsin is very serious. But that loss would be the same if unions had forsworn the recall. Around 175,000 employees would still be stripped of union rights, with

all that entails for them personally and for the material and organizational basis for progressive mobilization. And while the electoral loss no doubt emboldened anti-union conservatives, not challenging the governor would have conveyed much the same message: It's politically safe to follow Walker's example—after all, the unions didn't even have the guts to take him on! Labor leaders confronted a genuinely hard choice: roll the dice on the recall, which everyone knew would be an expensive and uphill battle, or give up.

For that matter, how should we account for last fall's referendum in Ohio, where voters overturned a copycat law modeled on Wisconsin's? The Ohio labor movement chose an electoral strategy—and won big. Was that also a “horrible mistake”? If not, what—besides the outcome—makes the Wisconsin choice obviously wrong, a crime instead of a tragedy?

Critics insist that union leaders should have chosen a more radical path, overturning the Walker regime by harnessing the people power of the capitol occupation. Rothschild calls for mass civil disobedience, slowdowns and strikes; Kroll for consumer boycotts and a new political party; Henwood for grassroots education and lobbying.

But none of these offers a realistic alternative for restoring labor rights in Wisconsin. At their core, these prescriptions fundamentally misunderstand the reality of how unions generate mass action. Both the tremendous strength and real limitation of the labor movement is that, alone among “left” organizations, it is not a vanguard movement. Unlike the Sierra Club or Occupy, its members do not join based on pre-existing ideological beliefs. Overwhelmingly, they become members because they get a job someplace that happens to have a union. Union members are, almost entirely, exactly the same as any other working-class Americans.

Pundits sometimes write as if all that's needed is for a union leader to make the right decision in order to generate radical action (thus Rothschild suggests that “unions could have told their members simply to ‘work to rule’,” assuming that hundreds of thousands of employees would risked their jobs to answer this call.) This imagines an institutional discipline that doesn't exist. The work of organizing is slow and incremental. The task of building a serious workplace or political organization entails taking normal, apolitical, nonconfrontational people and moving them to a clearer understanding of the economy and a fiercer will to confront those who rule it. For any reader to sense what this is like, just go into work tomorrow and start asking co-workers to put their jobs at risk by striking over a demand for single-payer or taxing Wall Street.

How long would it take to get your fifty closest co-workers to strike? How many would stay out after their personnel supervisor calls them at home telling them to come back?

How do employees go from being mild-mannered workers to fighting the power? Many get transformed through struggles in their workplace. Workplace fights are where the hypocrisy of management is unmasked; where the injustice of budget priorities becomes apparent; where people experience the capriciousness of elites and the potential power of collective action in a very visceral way; where people who are personally conservative and not activists end up doing things that require bravery (in most jobs even signing a petition creates some risk of retaliation) and emerge from it feeling more powerful and more ready to do the next thing. In a less transformative way, many more people are educated through conversations with stewards who are carrying out union education programs. Generally, these conversations are short and few—so union members end up thinking and voting more progressively than otherwise similar people, but not hugely so.

Radical actions remain possible. But we have to be realistic. The notion that the path to victory is clear if only dim-witted union leaders would listen to progressive bloggers reflects not just magical thinking about organizing but also the hubris of being far enough removed from the action to believe you're the only one to have thought of a new idea.

In fact, hundreds of union leaders and activists have been working for years to build a broader movement—stronger, more militant, with a broader reach into the community and a more expansive vision. Apart from Occupy, the main organization running big public actions to tax the 1 percent is the nurses' union. SEIU sent hundreds of field organizers to working-class neighborhoods in seventeen cities, knocking on doors of non-union families, seeking to build a progressive political movement to the left of the Democrats. The Laborers' union launched efforts in multiple cities to team up with immigrant day-labor centers in order to reorganize parts of the residential construction industry. The UFCW is organizing Wal-Mart employees to fight store- and community-level battles over back wages long before there's any plan for a union contract. The AFL-CIO itself has devoted significant resources to Working America, a program of political and educational outreach to non-union workers.

My point is not that everything is already being done that should be done. We've been losing, so obviously the current strategy can't be sufficient. But the problem

is much more serious, and more difficult, than just the strategic choices of union leaders.

Many unions can do a lot of things better, and should. But the depth of the attacks from the left—and the choice to launch them at this particular moment—is curious.

Henwood sees Wisconsin as evidence that the American public has turned against unions—and for good reason. “Unions just aren't very popular,” he explains, because people correctly perceive that “unions...are too interested in their own wages and benefits and not the needs of the broader working class.” The core problem, apparently, is that unions are too focused on organizing workers and negotiating contracts, activities no longer viable in the twenty-first century. “Unions have to shift their focus from the workplace to the community,” he says, proposing a popular campaign to “agitate on behalf of the entire working class and not just a privileged subset with membership cards.”

But unions are *supposed* to be organizations of workers who improve their own conditions in their workplace. The problem is not that the model is bad, but the opposite: the best thing that could happen in our economy is for more people to have the right to bargain with their employers in exactly this way.

Here too Henwood blames unions. American workers don't join unions, he says, in large part because they're controlled by cronies who enrich themselves at the expense of their members; he approvingly quotes Bob Fitch's equation of elected union officials with “feudal vassals” living off “serfs who pay compulsory dues.”

At this point we've left real economic analysis. Polls show that 40 million non-union American workers wish they had a union in their workplace. This is unsurprising—all other things being equal, workers with a union make 15 percent more and have a 20–25 percent better chance of getting healthcare or pensions than similar workers who have no union. The top reason that more Americans aren't union members is not because they're alienated; it's because the anti-union industry is so aggressive (almost 20,000 Americans a year are economically punished for supporting unions in their workplace), and the law is so toothless that workers correctly fear for their jobs if they try to organize. After all, if the real problem was overpaid union bureaucrats, then radical unions like the Wobblies or United Electrical workers—unburdened by highly paid staff or Democratic politics—should be meeting greater success in organizing. But,

of course, they are not. The problem is not what unions are doing; it's the coercive power of employers.

Furthermore, even while workers mostly focus on improving their own conditions, unions are by far the biggest force working to protect the interests of working people in general. Even as unions have been under such ferocious attack in state legislatures and struggling to repel those assaults, they've also been at the forefront of fights to protect minimum wage, child labor laws, unemployment insurance, pay equity, class size, immigrant rights and tax fairness—none of them union-specific issues. That, indeed, is why Walker and his corporate backers are so intent on dismantling them. The past two years have seen some of the country's biggest private corporations devote millions of dollars to attacking public sector unions. This is not primarily because of ideological beliefs or a desire to pay less taxes. They see what some critics apparently miss—that unions remain the only serious countervailing force to the unbridled power of the corporate elite.

Most employees naturally want their dues money to be mainly devoted to caring for themselves and their co-workers. Every time a campaign is undertaken to preserve class size or fight free trade agreements, people are making a decision to spend their dues money on something other than themselves. So, while more could be done, the criticism of union members and leaders for being too selfish is not based in reality.

Here's the hard truth. We're living in a dark time, and it's gotten very hard for normal working Americans to win either at the workplace or in politics. We are massively outspent, and people are so scared of losing their jobs that it's hard to fight back on a large scale. We have not figured out a reliable way to win. But the fundamental dynamics of power are the same as they ever were. We need to fight as smartly and as powerfully as we can, understanding that the game has not changed but simply gotten a lot harder. Of course there are things unions can do to be better and more effective, and those matter. But declaring organizing and contracts a thing of the past is not part of that.

The only serious choices we have are to keep fighting even though times are hard, or to give up, or to enjoy the momentary rush of being on the same side as power and join in the anti-union attack.

**Author's clarification (June 19, 2012):** While I have serious criticisms of the columns about Wisconsin written by Matt Rothschild, Andy Kroll and Doug Henwood, it was wrong to term their writing "left anti-unionism" or to suggest that they were driven by the desire to cozy up to power or enjoy the thrill of

attacking unions. Those words were written in a moment of anger, and they were a mistake. There are real enemies of working people and workers' organizations, and they're not these three authors. Nothing in this piece, or anything I've ever written, was designed to silence anyone. The tradition of left criticism of union practices—while I agree with parts and disagree with others—has helped make the labor movement more accountable, more democratic, and stronger. I posted an "author's clarification" comment on the Nation website within hours of the piece going up, but knowing most people don't read the comments, I wanted to append this note to my original piece. These authors do important work and don't deserve to have their motives called into question.

The body of the piece—in between the headline and last line—I stand behind. I look forward to moving on to have a debate on the substantive issues on which we disagree. For now I want to be clear that from my point of view, that's a debate that will take place among people who, in the most important way, are on the same side, and want to apologize to Matt Rothschild, Andy Kroll and Doug Henwood for implying otherwise.

Originally published at *The Nation*:  
<http://www.thenation.com/blog/168435/opinionnation-labors-bad-recall#>

---

## *Lessons from Wisconsin*

**BILL FLETCHER AND JANE McALEVEY**

---

Before Wisconsinites voted down the attempt to recall Governor Scott Walker, and certainly since, principled progressives inside and outside of unions have disagreed on whether or not the campaign should have happened. In fact, between the two of us, we don't fully agree about whether or not the recall was the correct tactic. But with the defeat in the rear view mirror, two clear lessons can be drawn from Wisconsin: unions need to reinvest in mass participatory education—sometimes called internal organizing in union lingo; and, unions need to stop focusing on "collective bargaining" and actually kick down the walls separating workplace and non-

workplace issues by going all-out on the broader agenda of the working class and the poor.

Once you get past the reports that Walker outspent the Wisconsin workers by 7:1, the next most startling fact is that 38 percent of union households voted to keep the anti-worker Governor. That's slightly more than one third, and had the pro-recall forces held the union households, Walker would no longer be Governor. With major media outlets drubbing us with the 38 percent number, the liberal political elite seem stuck on a rhetorical question: why do poor people and workers vote against their material self-interest? Actually, in our own experience, the poor and working class don't vote against their self-interest—but there's a precondition: we have to create the space for ordinary people to better understand what their self-interest is, and how it connects with hundreds of millions in the US and globally.

Participatory education can best be carried out within unions through an on-going organizing program. We know from years of experimenting that adults learn best through taking direct action. Actions themselves are often transformative. And how to calibrate the learning and action dialectical is the work of good organizers—paid and unpaid. But today's unions have all but abandoned organizers, educators, organizing and radical, participatory education. Why?

First off, many union leaders, despite their rhetoric, do not believe in the critical importance of worker education. Instead they believe in "PowerPoint." They invest truckloads of money into pollsters who perfect their quick and fancy presentations with graphics which all too often aim to dazzle rather than educate. They believe that worker education cannot be quantified and does not necessarily translate into a specific, tangible outcome, thereby making it worthless.

A second reason for the anemic internal education is the legacy of the Cold War and McCarthyism. "Big Picture" education that truly examines the roots of the current economic crisis and the nearly forty year decline in the living standards of the average US worker leads to a fundamental critique of capitalism. This conclusion scares many leaders who fear being red-baited, or may even harbor a fantasy that that they will at some point be re-invited to the ruling circles of the USA.

A third reason is that an educated and empowered membership can be unpredictable. They may start asking questions that many leaders wish to avoid. They may start suggesting different directions. And,

horror of horrors, they may actually run for office in the unions themselves.

The second big lesson from Wisconsin is that we can't do it alone. While the attack by Walker was a frontal assault on women, people of color, workers, the poor and more, unions all too often kept the focus on collective bargaining. When unions allowed the battle in Wisconsin to go from mass collective rage over the excesses of the One Percent to a battle for union rights, it was all but game over. Criticism of Democratic candidate Barrett's refusal to go along with labor's messaging on collective bargaining is beside the point—in our opinion, the campaign was lost before the May primary. Reassured by polls showing a majority of Americans (61 percent) support the "right" to collective bargaining, union leaders failed to anticipate the power of a barrage of wedge messages about over-paid government bureaucrats, taxes, union bosses, the unfairness of why public sector workers get pensions and so-called private sector ones don't and much more. Walker had the apparatus of the state and he had bought the media—he essentially turned Wisconsin into one big captive audience meeting, subjecting Wisconsites to the kind of unbearable pressure that workers in private sector union elections are all too familiar with. We don't poll in elections where workers are going to vote as to whether or not to form a union because we understand polling is useless in a hotly contested, deeply polarized fight.

In union elections, the sophisticated union busters want to ratchet the tension up so high that everyone associates the new tension in their life with this thing called "the union." And the boss drives a message that if the union goes away, everything will go back to normal. And normal, which wasn't OK before the campaign, suddenly sounds good because the venom and hate feel much worse. To have any chance of beating these kinds of campaigns, the campaign can't be about "collective bargaining" or "the union." It has to be about a bigger fight for dignity and economic justice that can deeply appeal to a much wider audience.

It is true there's been an uptick of unions declaring the importance of building allies and "working with the community," but still the community is too often treated as if it's a separate species from "the workers." The workers *are* the community, and yet union leaders act like 'the community' is some foreign land that requires visas, formal paid ambassadors and a Rosetta Stone language learning kit. The reason most labor leaders don't understand the community is because they stopped trying to understand their members and the unorganized workers who live side by side in every union member's house. The way back to winning big majorities of Americans to the cause of labor is for

labor to take up the causes of the majority. This isn't rocket science, it doesn't require pollsters or power point—it requires thousands of meaningful conversations with tens of thousands of people. It requires rebuilding our organizing muscle.

But the phrases, “organizing doesn't work, it's too slow,” or the variant, “organizing doesn't work, it's too expensive,” have become like a mantra in union headquarters (and the offices of foundations). And yet for our entire adult lives, almost every time we have seen workers and poor people given the opportunity to stand up and fight back, they did.

What about the recall? Wisconsin was a *wicked short* timeline—unions and their supporters were trying to overcome forty years of no real education or organizing among the rank and file. The recall failure has led to an open season on unions, but this isn't just a problem with unions. Multiple institutions have failed workers for decades, starting with the Democratic Party. And if that's not enough, there's our public school system—including universities and legions of intellectuals—that fail to teach students how to understand the actual power structure in our country or what unions are or have done. And, corporate owned media that have long distorted the real story of unions.

The reason that unions themselves, not front groups, need to take up the key issues facing their base when they aren't at work is because this model of community work helps to develop even more worker leaders—it provides an ongoing action-learning program for the members when their contract has been settled. And, pedagogically, it helps the members to better understand all the forces keeping them down. “The boss” becomes the economic and political system rather than simply the swing shift supervisor or the foreman or the CEO.

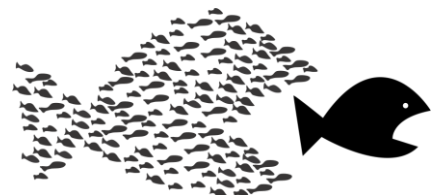
There are plenty of important structural issues that the rank and file could be engaging, including the on-going housing, credit, climate, public transportation, and child care crises. And there's the matter of bringing the worker's sons, daughters, nieces, nephews, brothers and sisters home from unwinnable wars of aggression. The very best way for unions to build real alliances with non-union groups is via their own members—the very people who make up “the community.” If unions expanded their issue work by engaging their own rank and file, we could develop even more skilled leaders, not simply ‘worker faces’ for a press conference. The organizing-education model assists people in creating better lives for themselves, rather than relying on paid professionals to do the work for them. And the results are that we build mini social movements, not special interest groups.

Organizing is incredibly hard work. And it's messy work. And the liberal elite, including most union leaders, are constantly investing in everything but deep organizing. The real reason we lost in Wisconsin is the same reason that progressives have been on a four decade decline in the US: it's because of a deep and long-term turn away from *organizing and education* and towards something that more resembles *mobilizing*. Organizing expands our base by keeping our energy and resources focused on the undecideds, and on developing the organic leaders in our workplaces and communities so that they become part of an expanding pool of unpaid organizers. Mobilizing focuses on the people who are already with us and replaces organic leadership development with paid staff. That and the split between “labor” and “social movements” account for the failure of progressive politics, the loss in Wisconsin, the ever shrinking public sphere, and the unabashed rule of the worst kinds of corporate greed.

The work we are describing isn't an election 2012 program, it's not a 12 month program; it must happen every day, every month and every year. It's ongoing. Workers are every bit courageous enough and smart enough, but they experience a lifetime of being told they are not worthy, not smart, and not deserving. In other words, sit down, shut up and listen. Unions have to challenge this paradigm, not reinforce it. When conservatives suffered their own strategic defeat and lost the election in 1964—by much larger margins than the recall in Wisconsin—they didn't say, “well, no point trying.” They instead built for the long haul and in 1980 it paid off with Reagan.

And with the Supreme Court edging eerily close to a ruling that will make all of America governed by “Right-to-Work” laws, unions have to start acting like they are already operating in a “right-to-work” environment. The education-organizing program outlined here is the very same program unions will need to survive let alone thrive under the current Roberts Court. The sooner unions stop acting like a special interest and start behaving like a social movement; the closer we will be to making lasting, positive change.

Originally published at *The Nation*:  
<http://www.thenation.com/blog/168435/opinionnation-labors-bad-recall#>



---

## *Beyond the echo chamber*

**ADOLPH REED, JR.**

---

I suppose I should begin by noting that, although I don't know Andy Kroll, I've counted Doug Henwood, Gordon Lafer, and Matt Rothschild as friends and comrades for twenty years or more. I know, and they all do as well, that each of them is a committed leftist. Each of them has been a staunch critic of how an ever more neoliberal Democratic Party has corralled progressive aspirations and screwed us over. So we can dial back on the breathless rhetoric about "silencing" and the like. No one is trying to silence anyone; nor is anyone, contrary to some of the overheated, scurrilous attacks on Lafer that have flown over the internet, angling to become a pinky-ringed lapdog of a stereotypically corrupt "union bureaucracy."

The problem beneath this debate about the labor movement's role in Wisconsin is that since the economic crisis we've all been confronted by our weakness and irrelevance as a left in American politics. This isn't really news, or shouldn't be. The left has been a solipsistic fiction in this country for years. It lives in an echo-chamber universe of actions, critiques and debates that have no institutional connection to anyone outside our own ranks and no capacity to influence the terms of national political debate. Reluctance to face up to that grim reality is understandable, and the relentlessness of the right's increasingly bloodthirsty attacks – on multiple fronts simultaneously – also understandably inclines progressives to look ever more desperately for hopeful possibilities. That in turn fuels a tendency to discover magic bullets, single interventions that will knock the shackles from the people's eyes, spark popular outrage and mobilize it into action. The Democrats' fecklessness in responding to these attacks and their acquiescence and, often enough, active collusion in supporting a regime of intensifying regressive transfer of income and wealth only exacerbates the problem.

Thus we've seen proclamation after proclamation that some new right-wing move has gone too far, or some new line in the dirt – Jesse Jackson's and Ralph Nader's presidential campaigns, Seattle, Katrina, Jena, the 2006 immigration marches, Barack Obama's election, Republic Windows, Wisconsin, wage theft campaigns, Occupy Wall Street -- will galvanize the

popular movement that will begin to turn the political tide back in our direction. Merlin Chowkwanyun ("The Crisis in Thinking About the Crisis," *Renewal* [2009]) catalogues the hyperbolic proclamations that the 2008 crisis itself would automatically bring about – if it hadn't already brought about -- the death of neoliberalism. That essay should be a cautionary tale for those tempted by this sort of wish-fulfillment politics. We didn't wind up in this situation overnight, and we aren't going to get out of it overnight. Yes, the dangers that confront us are truly nightmarish, and the thought that we may not have the capacity to curtail the worst – elimination of protections on the job, pensions and benefits, including Medicare and social security, destruction of the public sector, if not the very idea of the public, the panoply of can-you-top-this assaults on women's reproductive freedom, just to name a few – certainly can push toward despair.

But there are no shortcuts to building a movement capable of responding effectively. The Spark is a myth, and the tendency to believe in it – consciously or not – will generate unreasonable expectations and then dash them. There is no ready-made constituency out there waiting to support a left political program if only it were properly announced. That constituency has to be built, and it can't be built in the heat of a fight, least of all when we're on the defensive.

That fact should inform how we think about the Wisconsin defeats. The initial defeat was that Scott Walker won the 2010 election. Everything after that was an uphill fight, and increasingly so because Walker had the huge advantage of control of public authority, including a state legislative majority, and then there was that cornucopia of right-wing corporate money. Yes, the response mobilized against his legislative blitzkrieg was impressive and inspiring, but it was also a struggle against very long odds. And there was always a tendency among leftists, in keeping with the myth of the Spark, to romanticize the "taking to the streets" element of the Wisconsin fightback, which meant that a couple of important lessons were, if not missed, at least underappreciated. Many observers have noted that the Madison occupation depended on intense, aggressive, even extraordinary mobilization by unions, and not only unions in Wisconsin. That point has underscored the labor movement's centrality to any mass action of that sort because it alone has the capacity – people and organizational and economic resources -- to pull it off and sustain it. The other side of that coin, however, is that the intensity of effort required to sustain that kind of action could not be maintained indefinitely. It is too easy to imagine, as the numbers in Madison grew, that the mobilization had taken on a life of its own, that the People were rising. However, generating and





sustaining that mass action required great commitment of effort and resources – effort and resources that weren't going toward meeting other pressing needs and commitments. In addition, while attention and focus were on the battleground in Wisconsin, other states passed legislation every bit as anti-labor and hostile to the public sector as Wisconsin. We couldn't match the Wisconsin mobilization everywhere.

I don't mean at all that the effort in Wisconsin was misplaced. Rather, my point is that mass protest is not the end all and be all of political action. It does not necessarily mark going on the offensive or seizing political initiative; it can just as easily be the opposite – an act of desperation or an attempt to create a little space or breathing room to try to recover from a serious blow. It is only the fetish of the Spark that underwrites the default assumption that mass protest or street action equates with radicalization and expansion of the struggle. How many of us have ever really *seen* (i.e., not simply read or heard about – everybody tells that fish story) a protest action grow entirely on its own to a point where it overwhelms political opposition or converts into a new insurgency?

The belief that politics works that way suggests a perspective similar to what Doug Henwood, along with Liza Featherstone and Christian Parenti, quite perceptively criticized some years ago as “activism” – a commitment to public action as the sole meaningful and intrinsically self-justifying form of political engagement. [“Action Will Be Taken”: Left Anti-Intellectualism and Its Discontents]. So what gives?

The tendency to scapegoat the labor movement for Walker's most recent victory in Wisconsin – and, to be clear, that is what I see in Henwood's, Rothschild's and Kroll's arguments – stems from frustration and desperation and, ironically, recognition, if only backhanded, of the fact that labor was the only element of the coalition challenging Walker with the material and organizational capacity to set and pursue

a strategy. What other organized political forces could be identified in order to be blamed? This scapegoating not only rests on a naïvely formalist juxtaposition of street action and electoral action; it also feeds on a long-standing suspicion in many precincts of the post-Vietnam era left of a politics rooted in institutions in general and unions in particular. Gordon Lafer is correct that these criticisms misunderstand what unions are and how they operate as democratic structures, the realities of union leaders' accountability to their members. I don't need to reiterate that argument, which he makes very well. I would also commend Corey Robin's blog posting offering a “Challenge to the Left” to consider what actually attempting to organize a constituency to support an unconventional program requires. For those who want to build a left, that's the mindset of slow, steady, face-to-face base-building we need, not lurching from one self-gratifying but unproductive action to the next. The point of politics is after all, to resuscitate an old Maoist dictum, to unite the many to defeat the few. Our objective has to be to create that “many,” not merely assume it's out there already.

At bottom, the problem is that this left has lived in the fictional echo-chamber universe for too long. Not being connected to practical politics anchored in institutions removes an important constraint of interpretive and strategic discipline and leaves too much space for indulging appealing but simplistic fantasies about political mobilization and what it requires. To wit, Matt Rothschild's and Andy Kroll's assertions that the popular actions in Wisconsin could easily have been expanded and sustained over a wider span and longer period fundamentally misunderstand the limitations of political action. Electoral mobilization is difficult enough; trying to spread the Madison direct action over the state would have been exponentially more so.

On that score, Bob Fitch was an exemplary person in many ways and a good guy, and we are all that much lessened by his death. That said, Doug knows, I suspect all too well, that I'm one of those who “detest” Bob's views of unions. Ultimately, as I said more than once to Bob himself, in his view the only sort of union worth having is one that it's not possible to imagine existing in the circumstances in which we have to operate. He was quick to reject out of hand as tainted beyond hope initiatives that had support of existing union leadership. Like so many flavors of Trotskyists, syndicalist romantics, and rank-and-file fetishists, he saw unions less as vehicles for workers to define and advance their interests than as corrupt entities holding back the development or expression of their members' “true” interests. To the extent that that view of unions dovetails with the right's contentions that unions are, well, corrupt entities holding back the development or

expression of their members' true interests and stealing their dues money like a collective Johnny Friendly, and to the extent that it proposes eliminating protections like the union shop, Gordon is correct that it is substantively a form of left anti-unionism. I don't see how that is at all like a McCarthyite charge. It's closer to, as we used to say when I was a kid, calling the thing by its natural name.

Like Doug, I think Sam Gindin, the long-time Canadian Auto Workers official, is very much a person whose perspective on the relation between the left and the labor movement is worth taking to heart. In an article in the forthcoming 2013 *Socialist Register* Sam makes the point that a labor movement that is disconnected from a vibrant left is impoverished, and a left that is not linked in some dynamic way to the labor movement is ultimately impossible. The project most vitally confronting us, Sam argues, is to begin trying to build a left that is committed to a socialist vision linked directly to the felt and expressed concerns of workers as articulated largely, though not exclusively, through their unions. If this debate can help throw that project into relief, it will have been productive.

I have one final comment about the "silencing" issue. I think it is appropriate to consider that some topics are, for reasons of political sensitivity (and, yes, concern that statements could wind up on the National Right to Work Committee's homepage qualifies as such a reason), best not discussed in open forums like *The Nation* or the *Progressive*. I do not think that such concerns violate some principle of responsible left journalism. Rather, denial of such constraints speaks to the left's disconnectedness from actual struggles; it is a luxury of our irrelevance as a left.

Originally published at *The Nation*:  
<http://www.thenation.com/blog/168435/opinionnation-labors-bad-recall#>

---

## ***On 'Left Anti-Unionism' and the Reason We Lost Wisconsin***

**Mike Elk**

---

As a labor reporter, I was dismayed to see Gordon Lafer's "Left Anti-Unionism?". In his first post, Lafer attacked pro-union writers for critiquing labor leaders in the wake of the Wisconsin recall election. He went on to write, "The only serious choices we have are to keep fighting even though times are hard, or to give

up, or to enjoy the momentary rush of being on the same side as power and join in the anti-union attack."

While Lafer has apologized for the remarks and said he made them in a "moment of anger," variations of the term "left anti-union" are often thrown around to silence critics of union leaders. For example, a recent *Wall Street Journal* article highlighted how AFSCME's outgoing President Gerald McEntee spent \$325,000 on charter jet flights since 2010, instead of flying coach the way most of the workers he represents do. AFSCME's response was to blast the report for being published by "the mouthpiece of right-wing, corporate America." Incoming AFSCME President Lee Saunders went on to say that those within the union who leaked the information "knowingly gave ammunition to the union's enemies at a time when the right-wing media want nothing more than to destroy the labor movement."

In the wake of the Wisconsin defeat, there has been far too little concrete criticism of why organized labor lost. The analysis pushed by unions has relied on claiming that Walker outspent his opponent by a margin of 8-to-1. However, the great champion of labor, Paul Wellstone, was outspent 7-to-1 in his first election for Senate right next door in Minnesota, and he still managed to beat an incumbent senator. Strong, organized labor candidates have always been outspent, but they are able to win by harnessing people power the way Wellstone did.

At the height of the occupation, when 100,000 protesters were occupying the capitol, polls showed Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett beating Governor Scott Walker 52-45. The key question is how did the movement in Wisconsin lose this people power?

Quite simply, union leaders have just not invested their members with that much people power—before or after the Wisconsin recall. In February 2011, two union leaders—Marty Beil, one of AFSCME Wisconsin's Executive Directors, and Mary Bell of the Wisconsin Education Association Council—agreed to across the board wage cuts averaging \$4,400 a year for their members. They did so without even taking a vote from their members. You can argue that agreeing to the concessions was a smart strategic move to win public support for collective bargaining rights, but shouldn't unions let their own members make that decision? How do unions distinguish themselves from corporate America if they don't allow their own members to even vote on whether or not to accept a \$4,400 wage cut?

Once Walker's bill passed and the drastic wage cuts went into effect, the avenues of protest for union supporters were limited. And by failing to show that

they would fight for workers in their day-to-day struggles through direct action, unions lost not just public support, but support from their own membership. After Walker's anti-union bill went into effect outlawing automatic collection of dues, the majority of AFSCME's members in Wisconsin chose to leave their union. Membership in AFSCME declined from 62,818 in March 2011 to less than half of that — just 28,745 in February of 2012. A majority of AFSCME members decided *not* to renew their membership in AFSCME—not exactly a vote of confidence for the union.

In right-to-work states where members can opt out of unions anytime, like public employees can do now in Wisconsin, unions have to maintain their organizational and financial strength through strong, non-stop internal organizing drives, encouragement of collective action on the job and the development of rank-and-file leadership that's very sensitive to the concerns of members. Had AFSCME engaged in a strategy of direct action in the workplace, similar in spirit to the capitol occupation, things might have gone differently.

The momentum of such a movement could have forced candidates like Tom Barrett to be more adamantly pro-union, like the fourteen Democratic state Senators who fled the state and became much stauncher union supporters. That would most likely have attracted more Wisconsin voters. Instead of engaging in direct action in the workplace, revitalizing their unions and changing the political terrain in Wisconsin, the state's labor leadership backed two Democrats, one in the primary and another in the general election, both of whom bragged in their public appearances about forcing concessions from public workers in the past.

Lafer dismisses the possibility of a direct workplace action, arguing that it's too difficult for "normal, apolitical, nonconfrontational" people to engage in workplace actions against their employers. He ignores, however, the fact that in response to Walker's bill, thousands of "normal, apolitical, non-confrontational" people working in public-sector jobs did go out on mass strikes. Thousands of teachers in numerous school districts across Wisconsin, including in Milwaukee and Madison, went on illegal, three-day sick-out strikes to protest Walker's bill. The illegal sick-out strikes swelled the size of the crowd then occupying the capitol to nearly 100,000.

Anyone who has ever been around a strike or union organizing drive knows that often in the course of being engaged in a labor struggle, people get inspired out of a sense of solidarity to do things that they never

would have thought possible. Sure, these kinds of actions are tough to initiate, but Wisconsin labor leaders could have at least tried to motivate workers in their workplace. Instead, Wisconsin Executive Council 48 Director Rich Abelson came out saying, "there has been no talk of a general strike, there has been no talk of targeted strikes, or job actions or anything else. Our dispute is not with our employers. Our dispute is with the Republicans in the Wisconsin Senate, the Republicans in the Wisconsin Assembly and Governor Walker."

Lafer then dismisses claims that unions were unable to fight in Wisconsin because they were saddled with "overpaid union bureaucrats" and were unwilling to take on the Democrats. In a factually inaccurate statement, he claims that a union like "United Electrical workers—unburdened by highly paid staff or Democratic politics—should be meeting greater success in organizing. But, of course, they are not. The problem is not what unions are doing; it's the coercive power of employers."

But the United Electrical Workers (UE), which caps its leaders salaries at \$56,000 and does not typically endorse Democrats, is indeed growing in states where collective bargaining for public employees is outlawed— states with Democratic governors like West Virginia and North Carolina. On the other hand, AFSCME, who reportedly pledged to spend \$100 million to re-elect Obama and whose outgoing president Gerry McEntee made a salary of \$387,000 (nearly seven times that of UE's president), has lost union members in those same states, according to UE Political Action Director Chris Townsend.

As AFSCME has seen its ranks dwindle in West Virginia, UE has become the biggest public-sector union in the state. Despite lacking collective bargaining rights in West Virginia, UE has been able to win small wage increases and grievances for its members by providing very intensive education to a network of shop stewards who then train their own union members in how to be militants.

Instead of building a rank-and-file system of strong shop stewards who could mobilize their members, AFSCME chose to continue giving money to the Democrats in West Virginia in the hope that these Democrats will come to their rescue. AFSCME continues to give to them despite the fact that the Democrats have controlled both the governor's house and the state legislature for the last twelve years, but refuse to grant collective bargaining rights to public employees in West Virginia. In the past, AFSCME has also given money to Democratic Governors in Virginia and North Carolina who also refused to grant collective

bargaining rights. AFSCME saw their union ranks dwindle while the shop-floor-oriented UE surpassed AFSCME's membership in those states, according to Townsend.

Is UE successful because they cap their union organizers salaries at \$56,000? I would say yes. People often ignore the importance of capping union leaders' salaries in their conversations about union reform. In the 1930s, UE Organizing Director James Matles said that maintaining salaries for union leaders similar to the workers they represent is important because "union leaders should feel like their members, not for their members." Union organizers feel like their members when they make comparable salaries and live in the same neighborhoods; they have a greater sense of urgency about fighting for their members as a result. (Full disclosure: my father has worked as a union organizer for UE for thirty-five years and makes \$50,000 a year).

It also makes sense from a practical financial standpoint. Why pay one union leader a \$387,000 salary when you can employ seven full-time union organizers for the same cost? A study of Department of Labor Records done by *Labor Notes* in 2010 showed that if you capped the salaries of nearly 10,000 union leaders or staffers making above \$100,000 to that amount, you would save \$294 million dollars a year that could be spent on organizing. Post-*Citizens United*, when corporations can spend all the money in the world to attack workers, the labor movement simply cannot afford to be paying union leaders more than \$100,000 a year.

Instead of trimming executive salaries, perks and maybe scaling back on AFSCME's pledge to spend \$100 million on the re-election of President Obama, AFSCME laid off half of its organizers in Wisconsin, according to AFSCME Wisconsin Council 40 organizer Edward A. Sadlowski, at a time when they should have been hiring more organizers in order to stop their membership losses and fight back against concessions.

Organized labor's current approach is not working, and we need all the critiques of labor leaders and organizing approaches in order to save the labor movement. As a labor movement, would we rather have a few union leaders embarrassed by how much they make, or do we want a serious discussions about how we revive the movement. Accusing pro-union people, who raise serious questions about the strategy, finances and political orientation of unions in effort to save unions of giving ammunition to union's enemies or being "left anti-union" is more than just absurd. It could kill the labor movement.

Originally published at *The Nation*:  
<http://www.thenation.com/blog/168435/opinionnation-labors-bad-recall#>

