

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON

You have undoubtedly been following the events in Wisconsin where Governor Scott Walker has decided that the best way to balance the state budget – a budget that, before Governor Walker took office and authorized some pro-business tax cuts, was scheduled to show a surplus -- is to ask the state's union member public employees to pay more for their health insurance coverage and to pay more for their retirement benefits. You may feel that this is not your fight: "Hey, I don't live in Wisconsin and I'm not a public employee." As a union leader, I believe there are deeper and better-lined pockets in which the money necessary to make up the budget deficit (whatever its origin) might be found, and I believe this IS your fight.

Reasonable people can disagree on how much union member public employees should pay for their health insurance coverage and their retirement benefits; and before Governor Walker took office, the place where these reasonable people would disagree was the bargaining table, where representatives of the government and representatives of the various unions would sit down and negotiate through the time-honored process of collective bargaining.

Governor Walker has decided that this time-honored process is better honored in the breach than in the observance; in addition to unilaterally re-allocating the workers' compensation package from salary to health and pension costs, his proposed legislation would strip these workers of the rights to collectively bargain anything except wages – and even that crabbed concession would be circumscribed. As the veteran of numerous bargaining tables, I can tell you that wages take up a miniscule percentage of the

negotiating time: working conditions, benefits, safety, quality of life, vacations, sick days, job protections,— all these take up the majority of negotiations. Having a say in our working lives – literally having a seat at the table – this is what collective bargaining is all about; this is the keystone of unionism. Without it, we go back to the days when workers served at the whim of the boss, with no recourse from unfair treatment but to quit the job and look for another.

Stripping Wisconsin's public workers of their collective bargaining rights will not add a penny to this year's coffers. Governor Walker seems to be so scared that he and his future negotiating teams will sink future budgets under the burden of costly benefits and work rules by giving away the store that he is unwilling to risk even having a conversation about these issues in the future. I don't think Governor Walker thinks so little of his negotiating skill; it's just easier to get what you want when you don't need anybody else's say-so. Governor Walker wants to kill off the public employee unions, and he has sparked a huge amount of interest among fellow governors as well as private employers.

I can understand why Governor Walker and thousands of employers around the country would like to get rid of unions. They usually make employees more costly by negotiating salaries and benefits employees wouldn't be able to achieve on their own. They mandate work rules that not infrequently add to the costs of doing business. They limit flexibility by insisting on a say in or approval of changes in working conditions. We unions can be a pain in the butt.

Forgive me, however, if I shed no more than crocodile tears for the poor, put-upon employer. Unions exist to redress what is historically and consistently an imbalance of power between those who hire and those who do the work. We have moved beyond the most egregious abuses of the late 1800's – dehumanizing sweatshops with their if-you-don't-come-in-Sunday,-don't-come-in-Monday attitude – but the constant pressure to improve the bottom line leads to coal mining companies ignoring safety protocols and school districts putting sixty students in a class. The cards are still stacked in favor of management, and that disparity will only get worse as a result of the “Citizens United” ruling giving corporations the ability to give unlimited funds to candidates. Unions are the best and nearly the only check-and-balance in the system.

I consistently see newspaper articles which compare how much public employees pay for their benefits with how much private employees pay for their benefits, with the clear implication that those public employees paying less are somehow scamming the system which would, in a laissez-faire, market-driven economy, require them to pay more. This is akin to saying that Equity actors on tour should make no more than non-Equity actors. Perhaps these “artificially” high wages or low benefit payments are a good thing; and the low wages and high benefit costs are a bad thing.

The struggle in Wisconsin is a clear-cut choice. The unions have indicated their willingness to pay more of their compensation toward health insurance and pension benefits, and Governor Walker has rebuffed this near-total capitulation, insisting on the stripping away of collective bargaining rights. It is a war against unionism, and if the efforts to dismantle public unions are successful, unions in private industry will be next.

As Florence Reece, the wife of a United Mine Workers organizer, wrote 80 years ago:

“Which side are you on, which side are you on?”