

(Editor's Note: The following article generated sharp debate in the IN editorial board because of its discussion of the race/class dynamic in the Wisconsin movement. We welcome responses from readers on this and any other controversial points.)

From Cairo to Madison, The Old Mole Comes Up For An Early Spring

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Insurgent Notes takes heart from the fact that, nine months after our first issue, governments in two countries (Tunisia, Egypt) have fallen, a third (Libya) is teetering on the brink, and masses have gone into the streets in Algeria, Yemen, and Bahrein. A February general strike in Bolivia, in response to further austerity, put paid to the myth of the "socialism of the 21st century" of Morales. Last fall, extra-union inter-professional committees appeared in the mass movement in France against Sarkozy's public sector pension "reform", and in December in Britain, working-class youth led the rioting against David Cameron's massive budget cuts there. When we used the subheading (in Insurgent Notes No. 1, for "The Historical Moment That Produced Us") "1789-1848-1870-1905-1917-1968-20??" even our guarded historical optimism did not allow us to foresee that 2011 could well be the next in the sequence. We are hardly so brash as to claim influence on these developments; we merely felt the early winds of the emerging tempest, and aspired, and continue to aspire, to be part of it.

Now, as we prepare IN No. 3 for publication, this seemingly global contagion has been extended in the biggest U.S. working-class mobilization in forty years in the American heartland of capitalism, in Madison, Wisconsin.

Whatever else may happen in the near to medium future, events have shown that the past four decades of class warfare (in the U.S. above all) in which only one side—the capitalist class--was fighting—have come to an end.

This hardly means that the institutions which safeguard and reproduce the system have been overthrown, however much they must stretch themselves to keep up with the daily-unfolding reality. In Tunisia and Egypt, "caretaker governments", politicians, parties and trade unions are working overtime to put an acceptable face on a revamped social arrangement to channel the popular movement, and above all the working class, into calmer waters.

Let us look, then, at the balance of forces as they are shaping up in Wisconsin. Forty years of unrelenting propaganda, chipping away at the post-1945 Keynesian dispensation in the U.S., have prepared this moment, when capital aims at turning its long war of attrition into a rout.

There can be little doubt that powerful forces have designated 2011 as the year for a showdown with public sector unions—state and local-- in the U.S., and these forces clearly see Wisconsin as a national test case to be repeated elsewhere, as soon as possible. These forces, propelled and financed by the likes of the infamous Koch brothers, want to use the momentum of the past year's hard right advance (Tea Party, etc.) against Obama's "socialist" policies (most notably the health care "reform", written by the insurance companies) to deliver a knockout blow to what they see as the last standing obstacles to their unrestrained "free market" feeding frenzy. They see their plan to abolish public sector collective bargaining, even after the anointed spokespersons (Democrats, union officials) of the opposing side have already whimpered their assent to "shared pain" in various budget cuts, as a 1-2 punch that will simultaneously allow them a free hand in ridding the state of whatever remains of public services, and also deprive the Democratic Party of a major source of its funding, the public sector unions.

For forty years, during which income disparities in the U.S. reached and then surpassed those of the pre-1929 period, the ideologists of the "free market" (promoting of course *their* agenda for the proper use of state power to get their snouts deeper into the public trough) , the wealthiest people in the U.S., who control the system at every level, have quite succeeded in demonizing "elitist" "special interests" highjacking the common good. "Special interests" have included at different times black people, Latinos, women, or gays, but no "special interest" has drawn right-wing venom like what remains of the organized labor movement. (Recall, for example, the Wall Street Journal's apoplectic response to the mildly successful 1996 UPS strike.) Meanwhile, that labor movement has declined from 35% of the work force at its 1955 peak to 12% today, with only 8% in the private sector. Such a decline, expressing first of all a hemorrhaging of decently-paid and stable unionized jobs through a combination of outsourcing, casualization and capital-intensive development, is one important factor in creating the gap between working conditions in the public and private sectors. Contemporary propaganda aimed at whipping up support for right-wing populist rage never mentions that public employees as a whole appear "privileged" today only because millions of other workers have been so beaten down for so long. (That the unions in both the private and public sectors, trapped in their ostrich-like parochialism, have never lifted a finger over the past 40 years to address this reality, nor do they do so today, is a problem to which we will return.)

Linked to this unending hurty-gurty about "special interests" has been a similar, droning one-note song about the stagnant, slothful state and "big government", as if these benighted souls did not know that it was "big government" that saved capitalism from the precipice in the 1930's depression. While we at Insurgent Notes have no use for the capitalist state, from an entirely different point of view, we note the same distortion of reality in right-wing propaganda, ignoring such statist phenomena as the Manhattan project or the Tennessee Valley Authority, not to mention the role of the state in the economic rise of Asia (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and now China) since the 1960's, or finally the statist-protectionist

(Hamiltonian) origins of U.S. capitalism itself (from which the Asians got the idea, via Germany). But of course the real targets of such muddying of the waters are such “entitlements” as widely-popular Social Security and Medicare. The “free-market” ideologists never mention the parasitical HMOs as a significant reason for spiraling health care costs and hence further state deficits, nor debt service (to fully-protected investors) on those deficits, nor the trillions spent (more recently) on war in Iraq and Afghanistan, not to mention the multi-trillion dollar bailout of the banks after 2008 and the resulting ongoing bonuses of the hedge fund and securitization crowd. The beneficiaries of such largesse are of course not “rent-seekers”, but the state civil servant retiring on \$19,000 a year or the destitute people in the slums left behind by de-industrialization, surviving on disability or Social Security and Medicare are, for the right, precisely that. Hundreds of pinhead PhDs in grey suits spend their days at the American Enterprise Institute, the Cato Institute or the Peter Peterson Institute putting the proper spin on statistics and propaganda to perpetuate this distortion of reality. All of this, moreover, is supposedly argued on behalf of the beleaguered “taxpayer” (and all this funded by the class in society that pays a smaller percentage of its income in taxes than any other), as if most “taxpayers” are not precisely the ordinary working people who benefit (mostly) from public education, transportation, health care, housing and various other services.

Finally, the mainstream “free market” propaganda is silent about the fact that, without “big government” and its massive deficits since ca. 1970, (financed to a significant extent by foreign holders of Treasury bills) their system would have collapsed long ago. A real implementation of a program of “small government” and balanced budgets as advocated by Milton Friedman and his ilk (who, for example, will pay for U.S. military and intelligence operations in 110 countries?) would promptly replace the 1970-2008 “hidden depression” with something qualitatively surpassing the post-1929 depression in scale and scope.

Enough said, for now, about the 40-year propaganda war by which the right has set the stage for the escalation of class war in Wisconsin, after having seemingly won the ideological high ground in significant sectors of American society, and the buzzwords (big government, the beleaguered taxpayer, “elitist” special interests, entitlements, rent-seekers, spiraling health care costs) that have passed for many into almost unchallenged self-evident truths as a result. To anyone likely to be reading Insurgent Notes, most of the preceding is quite well known. The propaganda war of the right, as part of the real one, has been powerfully abetted by the ideological disarmament of the “left”, for the most part hypnotized by its Keynesian/ Social Democratic assumptions and thereby blinded to the real crisis in production and reproduction which began long ago, and thus incapable of effectively countering the fog of lies set down by the ideological carpet-bombing of the right.

We are of course much less concerned with charging through an open door in a fairly well-known critique of the right and hard right than with assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the left as they have been taking shape in the ongoing confrontation at Madison, and first of all because some of those

weaknesses mirror the ideological fog of the right.

We naturally begin by expressing our delight at the return of class struggle in the American heartland on a scale not seen since the early 1970's, and with a mobilization far surpassing such notable but isolated and losing struggles as the Hormel (P-9) strike in the same area (Austin, Minnesota) in 1985-1986, or the even longer "three strikes" (in both senses of the term) in Decatur Illinois in 1993-1996. The scale of what has been transpiring in Wisconsin since mid-February reflects the scale of the crisis of U.S. and world capitalism today, far graver than either in the 1970's or the 1990's (even though it is an extension and deepening of the selfsame crisis, a point we cannot elaborate here).

A brief rehearsal of the (again, broadly known) "facts" is also in order. Riding the wave of the brain-dead right-wing populist backlash ("Big Government Keep Your Hands Off My Medicare!" went one particularly eloquent slogan) in the November 2010 elections, Scott Walker and the Republican Party took over the governorship and both houses of the Wisconsin state legislature on a program built around "creating jobs". No sooner were they ensconced in power than, borrowing a page from Naomi Klein's Shock Doctrine, they gave major tax breaks to the wealthy and to corporations, and then, invoking a state deficit greatly exacerbated by those very same tax breaks, attempted to ram through legislation, not merely imposing slash- and- burn cuts in social services of all types, but also enabling the state government to privatize at whim without the slightest public oversight, and, adding insult to injury, effectively abolishing collective bargaining rights for public employees. (The bill was not rushed through only because 14 Democrats in Wisconsin's upper chamber left the state to prevent the quorum necessary for certain passage of the bill by the Republican majority. The bill was ultimately passed on March 10 in the absence of the Democrats, by further legal maneuvers. Walker and his minions intended to achieve their pillage by stealth and shock, but they were shocked in turn by the unleashing of a statewide, regional and ultimately national mobilization that (as of this writing) led to an ongoing occupation of the state's Capitol Building and repeated mass demonstrations, in freezing weather, of between 70,000 and 100,000 people (culminating—to date—on March 12), and support demonstrations in fifty states. (The movement had been launched almost immediately in response to the legislative launch of the bill in a rolling strike wave that shut down schools throughout Wisconsin.) Demonstrations on this scale had not been seen in Madison since the Vietnam War, 40 years ago. And we can measure the distance from that era by noting the far greater presence, in the current mobilization, of a broad swath of the organized labor movement, which was cool or downright hostile to the movement of the late 60's/early 70's. This time it's for keeps.

Everyone on both sides understands that this is for keeps. We cannot know if the Koch brothers and the national Republican command central which is closely monitoring events (with an eye to trying the same tactics elsewhere, most immediately in Ohio and Indiana) specifically chose Wisconsin as their preferred test run. On our side, there is a palpable whiff of "Tahrir Square" in the obdurate persistence of masses who come, day after day, to demonstrate and occupy with

the idea of outlasting Walker and his cohorts. But Wisconsin and America are not Tunisia or Egypt, because here, unlike those doddering gerontocratic dictatorships with no popular base when the crunch came, the U.S. is still in the midst of a surging right-wing populism that positively admires what Walker is attempting, and wishes to emulate it at the first opportunity. This permits the right to reach out demagogically to the very same private sector workers it has steamrolled in the past, referring to the supposedly privileged lifetime jobs of public employees, not subject to “competition” and “market forces”, with their benefits, health plans and supposedly Rolls Royce pension plans, which have become “unsustainable” by (among other things) the very erosion of the tax base that has resulted from downsizing nearly everyone else and from one of the most regressive tax structures in the “advanced” capitalist world, (advanced mainly in senescence). In other states, these same attacks are carried out by Democrats such as Jerry Brown (California) and Andrew Cuomo (New York), abetted by the very unions that financed their 2010 elections. (Mainstream propaganda rarely mentions that many state and local pension funds are in trouble because of massive losses in “AAA”-rated junk in the 2008 meltdown; “toxic assets” from Wall Street were reimbursed at 100% in the U.S. government bailout, the toxicity was dumped on the states and municipalities, and the famous “taxpayer”—ordinary working people—winds up paying in higher taxes and with lower or even disappearing pensions.)

Having expressed our unequivocal enthusiasm for the mobilization in Wisconsin, we sense that this movement, as the first confrontation in what certainly will be a national issue in coming months, is in its very early stages. Madison, the state capital where the movement is focused, is also a liberal university town where, like Cambridge (Mass), or Ann Arbor (Michigan), or Berkeley (California), some palpable afterglow (albeit diminished) of the Sixties still lingers. (A fair number of those who lived through the Sixties there are still there, and have been in the streets.) It is the capital of a northern Midwestern state where, as in Minnesota or North Dakota, a northern European (Scandinavian and German) Social Democratic and a native-born prairie populism deeply marked the political culture, most notably associated with the name of Robert La Follette, however attenuated those currents may be today. Some in the crowds at the massive weekend demonstrations waved a number of American flags and even sang the national anthem or “God Bless America”; not our style, but we know well that the IWW on occasion (as in the great Lowell Massachusetts Strike of 1912) did the same, attempting to take that symbolism away from the capitalists and their state. We surmise that many, perhaps most of the demonstrators were disillusioned Obama supporters, some of whom may still hope (God help them) that he will come out in clear support of their movement. The Wisconsin Police Association (11,000 members) has, like prison guards (who are members of AFSCME), indeed supported the movement, and the laid-back, even jovial relations between the demonstrators and the police strikes us as another manifestation of a movement in its early stages. We cannot imagine the NYPD or the LAPD, dealing with the occupation of public buildings by young blacks and Latinos in similar circumstances, being so relaxed when similar cuts hit home elsewhere, as they will. Widespread talk of defending the “middle-class” way of life also strikes us as

an American ideological muddle that must be overcome.

(Many of the cops and prison guards are former blue-collar workers or potential workers who never made it to the working class. Jay Gould famously remarked long ago that he could hire one half of the working class to kill the other half, and American capitalism in recent decades has amended that to hiring part of the working class to incarcerate another part.)

We also note the apparently overwhelmingly white (judging from on-line photos and videos) composition of the movement, at least in Madison itself. We doubt the significant black population of nearby Milwaukee, not to mention of nearby Chicago, would be so sanguine about the presence of police and prison guards in any movement it chose to join. (Wisconsin has routinely ranked at or near the top of states for the rate at which it locks up blacks compared with whites. In Dane County, where Madison is, nearly half of black men between the ages of 25 and 29 residing in the county are either incarcerated or under court-ordered supervision. Black men there are 21 times more likely to be incarcerated than white men.) The Wisconsin movement has to date toed a fuzzy line between legality and illegality (it occupied the Capitol building, and finally evacuated it when asked to do so by the police, and a teacher sick-in has amounted to a wildcat strike, strongly supported by student walkouts). But when this movement, or similar movements elsewhere, have to cross the line of illegality and *shut things down*, law enforcement personnel will either have to break with their roles as police and prison guards or else will turn on the movement, under orders.

We mentioned at the outset the crucial role of institutions that must sustain and refurbish the status quo. Here we speak of course of the unions and of the Democratic Party, both of which desperately want to sign on to some version of Walker's budget cuts, if only he will stop short of abolishing collective bargaining. Jesse Jackson and Rich Trumka—to how many losing causes have they given the kiss of death over the decades?—flew in to work the crowds with their demagoguery. Michael Moore flew in on March 5th to give a rousing populist speech that never once mentioned capitalism and invoked the U.S. constitution. The Democratic politicians in hiding in Illinois were apparently in daily touch with “reasonable” Republicans in the state senate, hoping thereby to get Walker to throw them the bone that will allow them to return and proclaim victory. Randy Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) flew in for the day and advised the movement to cede to all the proposed cuts, then flew out again.

This whole show by the duly-appointed left-wing guardians of the status quo hardly means that the masses of the mobilized rank-and-file, who started this movement by walking out (led by high school students) almost as soon as the bill became known, share these craven, threadbare illusions. It does seem that a majority is willing to give in on wages and benefits, but not on the indispensable right to collective bargaining, which if nothing else means some modicum of protection on the job from harassing supervisors, and the right to tell such supervisors to shove it without being unceremoniously fired on the spot. Giving so much ground from the get-go is in our view not the best strategy, but we certainly

support whatever minimal protection union membership provides day to day on the job.

We sincerely hoped that the movement in Wisconsin would succeed in stopping Walker's bill. But win or lose, the national movement it has unleashed must understand that this is still, on a greater scale, the kind of defensive struggle that the American working class has for the most part lost, going back to the early 1970's. At some point, these defensive struggles have to go on the offensive. People involved in them, and those who will be joining them, have to realize that the situation we are in provides no room for any stopgap solutions. The world crisis of capitalism is not about greedy, reckless Wall Street bankers or the machinations of the Koch brothers or tax breaks for the rich or two-bit local politicians trying to balance budgets; these are, in different ways, deepening symptoms of a crisis in capital accumulation that started 40 years ago. From here on out (and for a long time already) there can only be stopgap victories on the way to taking economic and political power away from the capitalists: in short, a social revolution. The movement in Wisconsin might like to recall Scott Walker and restore the status quo ante, but that status quo ante was already one of long-term grinding down of working people that finally has come for its pound of flesh from the previously (somewhat) sheltered public sector. There is no going back.

Individual sectors, even as large as public employees in the U.S., have to reach out to all those who have been ground down over the past forty years. Any working-class movement worthy of the name embraces the interests of the most oppressed, and that today includes the 15-20% of the U.S. population currently unemployed and increasingly foreclosed into homelessness, the casuals and temps, the harassed immigrant workers both legal and illegal, the millions of marginalized youth, white black and Latino, and the three million people in prison. We know very well that not every struggle that erupts can immediately enlist all such people, but a "climate" must be created in which that universal outreach—what we might call a "class for itself" orientation-- is understood as a necessity, much as such a climate existed, for a few years, in a less extreme situation, in the 1960's. No reformism is possible today, and those who do not yet recognize that nothing can change for the better without changing everything--a social revolution--will have to do so. That means, for starters, running off the Democratic Party and the trade union bureaucrats, the Jesse Jacksons and Rich Trumkas and Michael Moores, whose job is to refurbish empty populist rhetoric about the "rich". That means understanding that such figures will talk as far to the left as the situation requires because they understand, as much of the Wisconsin movement may not, that in a rapidly polarizing situation the ultimate issue is power and control. (We do well to remember that, in the midst of the Minneapolis general strike of 1934, the local Democratic Party Congressman proclaimed himself a revolutionary socialist.)

The coming months, from the Middle East to Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana, will undoubtedly be decisive.

