

The



# LOWDOWN

EDITED BY JIM HIGHTOWER AND PHILLIP FRAZER

EXCESSED™

—The euphemism being used by various officials across the country to notify thousands of teachers that they are fired, as in: "You have been excessed."

*This is class war!*

## A battery of elected ideologues opens fire on those who serve the public

YOU'RE NOT LIKELY TO HAVE KNOWN Robert Clark, Ruth West, Chet Newall, Webb Kamp, or Darrell Odom, but I wouldn't be who I am without them. And you might have a similar honor roll of those who spurred, inspired, lured, intrigued, goaded, and otherwise motivated you to do more than you might otherwise have done—a list of your special public school teachers. The junior-high, senior-high, and college teachers on my list largely sparked my lifelong interests in language, history, politics, and how (and for whom) government really works.

However, I was naïve about their motivation. Little did I know at the time that their ilk are tax-sucking leeches, glorified babysitters, overpaid slugs who leave work at 3 p.m. and take the whole summer off. "Greedy," as New Jersey Governor Chris Christie barked at teachers in his state.

Thus America is suddenly at war against its own teachers—along with its firefighters, police officers, public health researchers and caregivers, sanitation workers, census takers, park rangers, air traffic controllers, and the whole horde of 'do-nothings' on the public payroll. Fire 'em, bust their unions, take away their democratic rights, slash their pay, increase their workloads, eliminate their pensions, and (most especially) *scorn* them.

Those are not just the vitriolic sentiments of a few red-faced, tea-party lunatics—but of a squawking flock of right-wing governors, state legislators, mayors, and members of Congress. These are our leaders speaking!

**IRONIC ASIDE:** The 'leaders' who're so wildly assailing public employees also happen to be public employees, and they consume a whole lot more of our tax dollars than those they're dissing. Gov. Christie, for example, siphons \$175,000 a year from the public treasury in salary—far more than any of those "greedy" teachers in his state.

And while politicos screech for deep cutbacks in rank and file workers, notice that they're not volunteering any givebacks in their own pay, pensions, health care, limousines, mansions, and other public subsidies. Apparently, they never had a teacher explain 'irony' to them, but it would be a better world if they took a remedial class on the concept. Oh, too late—teachers of irony have been fired.)

Funded and orchestrated by such hard-core, anti-laborite billionaires like the Kochs, DeVoses, Bradleys, Scaifes, Coorses, and Waltons, the right wing has declared open season on public employees. But don't think that the assault by corporate extremists stops there. Using the GOP and the tea partiers as their political foot soldiers—they intend to dismantle the public sphere, crush all unions, downsize the entire middle class, and banish egalitarianism as an American ideal. Ready or not, our nation has devolved into a new and nasty **civil war**, with moneyed elites now charging into legislatures and courts to separate their good fortunes from the working class and to establish themselves as a de facto plutocracy.



### Battlefields

"Extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice," declared Sen. Barry Goldwater in his failed presidential try in 1964. Today, though, the billionaires masquerading as Goldwater's libertarian heirs are seeking only to 'liberate' themselves from our democratic society's essential rules of fair play. They resent paying taxes for anything that benefits others, they demand freedom from regulation of their corporate excesses, and they absolutely reject the notion that workers, consumers, environmentalists, and other community interests should have any power over corporate whim.

Their sense of entitlement is nauseating, and their ongoing militant maneuvering in state after state to dis-empower America's workaday majority constitutes a declaration of war against our people's democracy. "Extremism in the defense of elitism" is their ugly purpose. That is a vice.

Ugly Number One is that theirs is a most *uncivil* war. It's based on demonizing some of the best and most useful workers in our country,

**AN ENTOMOLOGIST** has seen the future of food. "The Netherlands," exclaims the professor, "wants to be in the forefront of food."

By "forefront," he's talking about waaay out there—all the way to buffalo worms, locusts, caterpillars, crickets, and other insects for human consumption. Just as the American West had its cowboys, this new food world will have bugboys wrangling great herds of crawling and squirming critters to market. A ranch of creepers and crawlers might not have quite the romantic appeal of a cattle ranch, but the bugs are said to pack a protein punch that is healthier than steak and far lighter on the environment. So let's all gather around the campfire and sing: "Oh give me a home, where buffalo worms roam, and the crickets and caterpillars play!"

Insect edibles are already a common source of protein in Japan, Mexico, Africa, and elsewhere and are now appearing in Dutch supermarkets and restaurants.

There is, however, the "ugh" factor. To help overcome this, a major Dutch supermarket recently offered a sampling of such items as mealworms in chocolate, "Bug Nuggets," and crispy whole crickets for snacking. As the entomologist put it, the Europeans' instinctive rejection of biting into a bug is "an acquired abhorrence," adding that "children have no problem eating them." It'll only take four or five years for consumers to buy into the insect future, he predicts: "It's all in the mind."

Plus, this shift can be a big boon for our environment. If bug cuisine catches on, instead of people spraying their yards and gardens with pesticides they can just reach for the cooking oil!

pitting these people's very modest incomes and perfectly reasonable benefits against those who've been knocked down and have less. "Don't look at us," shout the corporatists who've been doing the downsizing and privatizing, outsourcing and offshoring—that have knocked down the middle class and held down the poor. "Instead, look at those just above you who are struggling to stay in the middle class. It's unfair that they have health coverage and you don't, so let's pull them down, too."

Who benefits from that?

The good news is that folks mostly have not swallowed this divide-and-conquer battle cry. Polls are consistently showing widespread opposition to right-wing proposals to fire the masses of public employees and rescind the rights of unions. The bad news is that GOP governors and congressional leaders don't give a damn about the will of the people; they're listening to the will of Big Money. So Ugly Number Two in the elitists' war is their willingness to use raw autocratic power to ram through their anti-worker agenda.

How ironic (there's that word again) that those purporting to be champions of "small, inobtrusive government" are quite comfortable with big, invasive, bullying government slapping down millions of America's working families. Let's take a tour of just a half-dozen battlefields in this rapidly expanding war:

**FLORIDA.** When newly elected Republican Gov. Rick Scott declared last year that he would run this state's government like a business, it was no idle threat. He had previously been CEO of the giant health care conglomerate Columbia/HCA, where he presided over massive Medicare fraud that cost his culprit corporation a \$1.7 billion federal fine and cost him his job.

Scott is a failed corporate executive, but he made off with a personal fortune, so naturally he dove into politics. His money allowed him to 'win' a three-way race for the governor's mansion with only 49 percent of the vote. Bringing his finely honed sense of big business ethics to the job, Scott is on a rampage to bust teachers and other wage-earners, slash services that regular people need, and make his state a safe haven for plutocrats. In only his first four months, Hizzoner has:

- **Demoralized** Florida teachers (already among the lowest paid in the country) by moving a bill requiring each of them to reapply for their job every year, with renewal of their contract dependent on how their students perform on a single standardized test. The bill will force more teaching-to-the-test and less classroom innovation, setting up even good teachers for failure and making the profession less desirable. In addition, Scott is a 'don't-tax-the-rich' zealot,

so the state's budget deficit is to be substantially narrowed by firing teachers and increasing the workloads of those who remain.

- **Depressed** (both economically and psychologically) Florida's hard-hit workforce by pushing legislation to cut jobless payments. With 11.5 percent unemployment, and with some of the most miserly unemployment benefits in the country, Scott is slashing the number of weeks that out-of-work Floridians can get jobless aid to as low as 12 weeks, rather than the standard 26. To add to his Scrooginess, his proposal also makes it easier for a corporation to fire employees, making workers ineligible for any unemployment assistance. As the house sponsor of Scott's bill explained, "Businesses need the state's help."

- **Worked** diligently to help one business in particular: his own. After being dumped by Columbia/HCA, Scott set up Solantic, a Florida chain of emergency care clinics. As gov, he is working to privatize Medicaid, which would create a huge statewide customer base of poor people for a certain chain of clinics tied directly to Scott (lest you think this is self-serving, the governor made a point of divesting his interest in Solantic just before taking office—he transferred ownership to his wife, literally putting his interest at arms length! This was so stinky that he later was forced to sell it).

- **Issued** an executive order requiring drug tests on thousands of state workers and every future applicant for state jobs. He's also pressing the legislature to mandate drug tests for all the hard-luck Floridians who apply for welfare benefits. Welcome to Rick Scott's Florida—please pee to prove your innocence! Now, guess which corporation is in the drug-testing business? Yes, Solantic.

- **Catered** to the rich. He has proposed massive tax cuts to corporations and millionaires, even as he wants to whack state education spending by 10 percent and taken an average of \$2,300 a year out of each teacher's paycheck. Moreover, in a perfect snapshot of his class-based values, Scott has tried to eliminate state spending on two historically black universities, while trying to funnel taxpayer dollars into the construction of golf courses in state parks.

**MAINE.** For sheer crudeness in going after labor, it'll be tough to top Paul LePage, the new gubernatorial potentate of the pine tree state. Previously the manager of a chain of discount surplus and salvage stores, this right winger won the five-way governor's race last fall with only 38 percent of the vote. Unencumbered by humility, LePage has interpreted his meager percentage as a sweeping mandate to repeal workers' bargaining rights, restrict the ability of unions to collect dues from

## DoSomething!

Here are just a few groups working to save America's middle and working class:

- **AFL-CIO:** [www.aflcio.org](http://www.aflcio.org)
- **United Steelworkers:** [www.usw.org](http://www.usw.org)
- **Service Employees International Union:** [www.seiu.org](http://www.seiu.org)
- **AFSCME:** [www.afscme.org](http://www.afscme.org)
- FLORIDA:**
- **Progress Florida:** [www.progressflorida.org](http://www.progressflorida.org)

- MAINE:**
- **Maine People's Alliance:** [www.mainepeoplesalliance.org](http://www.mainepeoplesalliance.org)
- MICHIGAN:**
- **Michigan Citizen Action:** [www.michcitizenaction.org](http://www.michcitizenaction.org)
- **Progress Michigan:** [www.progressmichigan.org](http://www.progressmichigan.org)

- OHIO:**
- **Progress Ohio:** [www.progressohio.org](http://www.progressohio.org)
- TEXAS:**
- **Texas Forward:** [www.txforward.org](http://www.txforward.org)
- WISCONSIN:**
- **We are Wisconsin:** [www.wearewisconsin.org](http://www.wearewisconsin.org)
- **Citizen Action of Wisconsin:** [www.citizenactionwi.org](http://www.citizenactionwi.org)

their members, cut pension benefits for state employees (though he mercifully exempted one—himself), raise the retirement age for public workers, cut programs that benefit Maine's middle class (while generously lowering the tax bill for the state's richest one percent), and even roll back child labor laws!

Then he literally raised disdain for working families to high art. In March, the governor dictated that an 11-panel mural be removed from the state labor department's lobby. The piece depicts scenes from the state's rich labor history, but the governor says it represents a "one-sided décor" that reflects poorly on his pro-corporate agenda. Also, his office claims that "some business owners" complained, including one who saw the painting as an attempt to "brainwash the masses." So, ever attentive to the artistic sensibilities of unnamed corporate executives, the mural was 'disappeared.'

This made LePage a national joke—"The most moronic and mindless anti-worker gesture in the country," editorialized the *Hartford Courant*, and the Maine People's Alliance ridiculed him as "the state's interior decorator." The sharpest sting, though, came from the US Labor Department. Pointing out that the mural had been paid for by a federal grant under George W. Bush's regime, the feds are dunning LePage to return the money or reinstall the artwork. The governor's office is presently studying its options.

**MICHIGAN.** Rick Snyder posed as a moderate Republican to win the governorship last November. But the real Rick turns out to be a flaming corporatist.

In a state desperate for programs to help its hard-hit working families, Snyder's first budget priority was to give corporations a 60 percent cut in taxes. To help make up for that revenue loss, he proposed to tax the pensions of working class retirees and kill the state's earned income tax credit for the poor.

Then came his low blow to Michigan's huge number of jobless folks. He snuck a provision into law that stops unemployment benefits after 20 weeks, taking away six weeks of assistance that every other state provides. The state chamber of commerce gloated that "it's a huge win for job providers" (aka, corporate barons). Indeed, the slick move will save corporations about \$300 million a year—money taken right out of the hide of jobless people.

But the jaw-dropper is his Local Government Fiscal Accountability Act. This tyrannical law effectively authorizes Snyder to seize control of local governments, sus-

pend democratic sovereignty, and hand municipal authority and assets to the corporations of his choice. He can declare that any city, county, school district, etc... is 'insolvent' and then appoint a manager to run the entity. This autocratic regent, which may be a private corporation, would have the power to bypass and even dismiss elected officials, commandeer the public budget, cancel all contracts (including collective bargaining agreements), decertify public employee unions, sell off assets, and even dis-incorporate the local entity.

It's the reincarnation of King George III, dressed in corporate splendor.

**OHIO.** John Kasich, a former GOP congressman, routinely bashed Ohio's unions in his 2010 gubernatorial run.

Backed financially by the likes of the Koch Brothers and Rupert Murdoch, he is now backing their vision of a union-free America. His club of choice is a draconian law that bars teachers and other public employees from striking for any reason, punishes any workers who participate in a walkout, eliminates automatic pay raises, bans any union effort to limit privatization of a government function, prohibits police and firefighters from access to binding arbitration in contract disputes, and only allows public employees to bargain with their governmental bosses when the bosses say they can.

Kasich excuses this by asserting that he was elected to make drastic cuts in state spending, including in the pay of these workers. But he has spared a few workers—those in his own office. For example, he is paying his chief of staff \$170,000 a year, nearly \$50,000 more than the position previously paid. To get "good people to come in" to government, Kasich said without a trace of irony, you have to offer good salaries.

None of this has endeared him to Ohioans. The public opposed his attack on working people (it passed by only one vote in the state senate), his approval rating after just three months in office has crashed to 30 percent, a sizable majority now would vote for his 2010 opponent, and there's a move to recall him.

But, for the moment, hundreds of thousands of Ohio workers have had their rights and financial well-being sacrificed at the Koch-Kasich altar of corporate ideology.

**TEXAS.** Gov. Rick Perry brags that he's made the lone star state "corporate-friendly." Here's what that friendliness buys you: While Texas' unemployment rate is not as bad as most states (it ranks a so-so 22nd), the wage

**GANNETT WORKERS' GIFT TO BOSSES**

**IT'S GOOD TO KNOW** that some corporate chieftains feel the pain of their underlings, who keep being forced to do more for less reward. Take the example of Gannett, the media giant that owns 23 television stations and 82 newspapers, including *USA Today*.

Early this year, Gannett employees were notified that, for the third year in a row, they would get no raises and would have to take a week off without pay. The note was written with a gentle hand, acknowledging the hardship that such sacrifices cause for workers and thanking them for their "great work." To soothe the pain a bit, the note added that Gannett's two top executives would take a commensurate cut in their salaries.

Okay, team spirit! But, only two months later, bonuses totaling \$3 million were quietly bestowed on CEO Craig Dubow and COO Gracia Martore. The two also were awarded stock options and deferred pay totaling as much as \$17 million.

So, some 32,000 workers were forced into furloughs to save about \$17 million for Gannett, but the corporation's number one and number two were then allowed to slurp up all of that savings and then some. Who says there's no 'I' in team?

It's not like the executives are doing a terrific job. With them at the helm, Gannett's newspaper readership, revenues, and stock price have fallen substantially, and the corporate chieftains are widely viewed as lacking imagination. But they are credited with "aggressive cost management"—a cynical euphemism for throwing employees in the ditch.

Once again, working people are sacrificed while top executives collect multi-million dollar bonuses.

**LOWDOWN**

EDITORS: Jim Hightower, Phillip Frazer  
 RESEARCH: Laura Ehrlich CIRCULATION: John Ernst  
 COPY WIZ: Cody Garrett ILLUSTRATOR: Brian Duffy  
 DESIGN: Sahu Barron INTERWEB EMISSARY: Deanna Zandt  
 PUBLISHER: Phillip Frazer

The *Hightower Lowdown* (ISSN 1524-4881) is published monthly by Public Intelligence Inc., 375 South End Ave #14P New York NY 10280. ©2011 in the United States. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY. Subscriptions: 1 year, \$15; 2 years, \$27. Add \$8/year for Mexico or Canada, add \$12/year for overseas airmail. Back issues \$2 postpaid. Allow 4-6 weeks for receipt of first issue and for all subscription transactions. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to: *The Hightower Lowdown*, P.O. Box 20596, New York, NY 10011.

Moving? Missed an issue? Call our subscription folks toll-free at (866) 271-4900 or write [lowdown@pipeline.com](mailto:lowdown@pipeline.com). Send us fan mail or hate mail at: P.O. Box 20596, New York, NY 10011 or [editors@hightowerlowdown.org](mailto:editors@hightowerlowdown.org).

Printed with 100% union labor on 100% recycled paper.

## GET THE LOWDOWN!

**YES!** I want to receive a full year of *The Hightower Lowdown*—12 issues in all—for an unbelievably ridiculous, low, low price.

Send me one year of *The Hightower Lowdown* for just \$15. (Seniors and students—\$12.)

Send me two years of *The Hightower Lowdown* for just \$27. (Seniors and students—\$22.)

To give a gift of the *Lowdown*, enter the recipient's name and address below and include your name and address on a separate sheet.

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

ADDRESS \_\_\_\_\_

CITY \_\_\_\_\_ STATE \_\_\_\_\_ ZIP \_\_\_\_\_

Mail this coupon with your payment to: *The Hightower Lowdown* P.O. 20596, New York, NY 10011 5/11

**WE'RE GETTING** an awful lot of high-decibel noise these days about the urgent need for "shared sacrifice" to cope with multibillion-dollar budget deficits. Everyone must do their part by giving up even essential programs.

Everyone? Who's that hiding over there in the bushes? Gee, it's General Electric, the global conglomerate that has made tax dodging its chief business. In the past five years, GE has amassed \$26 billion in profits just from its American operations—and paid exactly zero in taxes. Far from paying its share of the cost for public services from which it, its honchos, and investors so richly benefit, GE has used its army of tax lawyers and lobbyists to get what amounts to a government payment of more than \$4 billion from us taxpayers. Wow, that money could keep a lot of teachers on the job.

But the tax code is not the only thing manipulated by this behemoth. While assorted media outlets covered the shameful tax dodge by GE, one did not: NBC. Guess who is a principal owner of that network? Right. It took the network a week to mention the story—and only then after its self-serving silence was exposed and mocked by Jon Stewart and others.

Meanwhile, GE is doing its own whack job on its workers by demanding that they agree to cuts in union wages, pensions, and health coverage. It's a concerted effort by corporate elites and their politicians to crush America's middle class. Exxon Mobil made \$19 billion in profits in 2009, paid no federal income taxes, and got a \$156 million rebate from the IRS.

Only 6.9 percent of our nation's tax revenue comes from corporations -- down from 30 percent in the 1950s.

structure here is deliberately worker-hostile—average hourly pay is the 44th lowest in the country. Texas is, however, at or near the top when it comes to the poverty rate, the percentage of people with no health insurance, the income gap between rich and poor, the most regressive tax system, the cost of electric bills, and the rate of high school dropouts.

Then there's the radioactive \$27 billion budget deficit that Perry has run up—the second-highest in the country. So who's expected to bear this deficit burden? The middle class and the poor, of course, including at least 100,000 school teachers who're now getting their "excessed" notices. Perry's budget chops current school spending by nearly \$8 billion, even as student enrollment soars. Teachers and kids must absorb the shortfall, says Texas Rick, because he can't bear to hike the meager taxes paid by corporations and the rich, nor will he stand for eliminating their tax loopholes and state subsidies. Texas budget writers admit that they will not begin to meet the state's basic needs and that Perry's stripped down budget will cost Texans 335,000 more jobs in the next two years. They're praying that theirs are not among them.

**WISCONSIN.** This is where America's middle class first planted its flag and confronted the civil war. As the *Lowdown* reported last month, newbie-Gov. Scott Walker's extremist, anti-worker agenda (developed for him by Koch-funded corporate front groups) sparked a massive grassroots rebellion of ordinary Wisconsinites, and they are not going away.

In substance, Walker's attack on laboring people is much like his fellow right-wing guvs in other states. But he has been especially arrogant, autocratic, and abusive in trying to ram it into law, essentially operating as an above-the-law, tinhorn tyrant. Walker and his legislative henchmen—openly backed by Koch money and operatives—are big government on a rampage. Here are just a few of their ends-justify-the-means tactics:

■ **WHEN 14 STALWART DEMOCRATIC SENATORS** left the state for Illinois to deny Walker the necessary quorum needed to pass his bill killing collective bargaining, his senate leader changed the rules so the 14 could not get their paychecks. When this silliness failed to lure any of them back, Walker's team plotted to send state troopers to arrest them—even though they had broken no laws.

■ **FURIOUS AT THE DEMOCRATS,** Walker got real petty. His legislative leaders decreed that the staffs of the 14 absent senators could not use copying machines in the capitol. That'll teach 'em!

■ **WITH OUTRAGED PROTESTORS** swarming into the capitol daily, Walker arbitrarily locked it down, illegally shutting peaceful Wisconsin citizens out of their own building.

■ **FROM THE START,** Walker loudly insisted that suspending public employee rights was necessary to balance the state budget. Finally, though, with Democrats still denying him a quorum, he suddenly dropped his fiscal responsibility pose, stripped the bill of all budget numbers, and—in a coup with little advance notice and no debate—slammed the anti-worker provisions through.

■ **A LAWSUIT,** however, claims the bill's passage was illegal because senate leaders violated the open meetings law to sneak it through. To consider this, a judge has temporarily blocked the statute—but Walker's agents made an end run and simply declared it enacted. No, said the judge, reinstating her injunction.

■ **WITH THE BATTLE NOW IN COURT,** the GOP senate leader issued a new rule dictating that while the 14 senate Democrats are free to attend committee meetings and cast votes—"those votes will not count." He was later forced to withdraw this autocratic absurdity.

**This is war**

The Powers That Be don't like us thinking in terms of class war, or even using the phrase. But from the ever-expanding wealth gap to the relentless downsizing and offshoring of American jobs, from the Supreme Court's enthronement of corporate political money to the state-by-state offensive on worker power—what else can it be called?

The six states above are certainly not the only battlefields—perhaps your governor, mayor, and congressional members are pushing the same attack. Did all of these officials independently and simultaneously choose to side with wealth against the rest of us—or is this a coordinated push? If it's the latter, what can you and I do about it? In the June *Lowdown*, we'll follow up on these questions with Chapter Two on America's Civil War.

You can comment on stories in the *Lowdown* on the new and improved website

[hightowerlowdown.org](http://hightowerlowdown.org)

PERIODICALS  
CLASS  
Postage Paid at  
New York, NY

The Hightower Lowdown  
P.O. Box 20596  
New York, NY 10011

**Moving? Missed an issue?**

Please call or write us at:  
The Hightower Lowdown  
P.O. Box 20596  
New York, NY 10011  
lowdown@pipeline.com  
Subscribers' toll-free  
number: (856) 271-4900

13:5 May 2011

**A BATTERY OF ELECTED  
IDEOLOGUES OPENS FIRE ON  
THOSE WHO SERVE THE PUBLIC**

Brave new world of food? ..... 2  
Gannett workers' gift to bosses ..... 3  
General Electric's tax dodging ..... 4