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OP-ED COLUMNIST

Wisconsin Power Play

By PAUL KRUGMAN
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Last week, in the face of protest demonstrations against Wisconsin's new union-busting governor, Scott Walker — demonstrations that continued through the weekend, with huge crowds on Saturday — Representative Paul Ryan made an unintentionally apt comparison: "It's like Cairo has moved to Madison."



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It wasn't the smartest thing for Mr. Ryan to say, since he probably didn't mean to compare Mr. Walker, a fellow Republican, to Hosni Mubarak. Or maybe he did — after all, quite a few prominent conservatives, including Glenn Beck, Rush Limbaugh and Rick Santorum, denounced the uprising in Egypt and insist that President Obama should have helped the Mubarak regime suppress it.

In any case, however, Mr. Ryan was more right than he knew. For what's happening in Wisconsin isn't about the state budget, despite Mr. Walker's pretense that he's just trying to be fiscally responsible. It is, instead, about power. What Mr. Walker and his backers are trying to do is to make Wisconsin — and eventually, America — less of a functioning democracy and more of a third-world-style oligarchy. And that's why anyone who believes that we need some counterweight to the political power of big money should be on the demonstrators' side.

Some background: Wisconsin is indeed facing a budget crunch, although its difficulties are less severe than those facing many other states. Revenue has fallen in the face of a weak economy, while stimulus funds, which helped close the gap in 2009 and 2010, have faded away.

In this situation, it makes sense to call for shared sacrifice, including monetary concessions from state workers. And union leaders have signaled that they are, in fact, willing to make such concessions.

But Mr. Walker isn't interested in making a deal. Partly that's because he doesn't want to share the sacrifice: even as he proclaims that Wisconsin faces a terrible fiscal crisis, he has been pushing through tax cuts that make the deficit worse. Mainly, however, he has made it clear that rather than bargaining with workers, he wants to end workers' ability to bargain.

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The bill that has inspired the demonstrations would strip away collective bargaining rights for many of the state's workers, in effect busting public-employee unions.

Tellingly, some workers — namely, those who tend to be Republican-leaning — are exempted from the ban; it's as if Mr. Walker were flaunting the political nature of his actions.

Why bust the unions? As I said, it has nothing to do with helping Wisconsin deal with its current fiscal crisis. Nor is it likely to help the state's budget prospects even in the long run: contrary to what you may have heard, public-sector workers in Wisconsin and elsewhere are paid somewhat less than private-sector workers with comparable qualifications, so there's not much room for further pay squeezes.

So it's not about the budget; it's about the power.

In principle, every American citizen has an equal say in our political process. In practice, of course, some of us are more equal than others. Billionaires can field armies of lobbyists; they can finance think tanks that put the desired spin on policy issues; they can funnel cash to politicians with sympathetic views (as the Koch brothers did in the case of Mr. Walker). On paper, we're a one-person-one-vote nation; in reality, we're more than a bit of an oligarchy, in which a handful of wealthy people dominate.

Given this reality, it's important to have institutions that can act as counterweights to the power of big money. And unions are among the most important of these institutions.

You don't have to love unions, you don't have to believe that their policy positions are always right, to recognize that they're among the few influential players in our political system representing the interests of middle- and working-class Americans, as opposed to the wealthy. Indeed, if America has become more oligarchic and less democratic over the last 30 years — which it has — that's to an important extent due to the decline of private-sector unions.

And now Mr. Walker and his backers are trying to get rid of public-sector unions, too.

There's a bitter irony here. The fiscal crisis in Wisconsin, as in other states, was largely caused by the increasing power of America's oligarchy. After all, it was superwealthy players, not the general public, who pushed for financial deregulation and thereby set the stage for the economic crisis of 2008-9, a crisis whose aftermath is the main reason for the current budget crunch. And now the political right is trying to exploit that very crisis, using it to remove one of the few remaining checks on oligarchic influence.

So will the attack on unions succeed? I don't know. But anyone who cares about retaining government of the people by the people should hope that it doesn't.

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