

MAKING UNIONS THE ENEMY

Editorial • The Berkshire Eagle • Sunday • February 27, 2011

No one has been heard singing “Joe Hill” or “Union Maid” in the streets of Madison, Wisconsin or wherever “working men defend their rights,” as the lyrics about Hill the union organizer go, but it has been a long time since America's unions have been defended and praised as much as they have been over the past week. The union-busting effort in Wisconsin and other states has provided a welcome reminder that unions, for all their well-documented faults, were instrumental in building America, and they still remain a bulwark against greedy corporate interests and the politicians those interests manipulate like puppets.

The effort by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker to unilaterally end the collective bargaining rights of public employee unions that had already made pay and benefit concessions violated Americans' innate sense of fairness. The crank call to the governor made by an online reporter posing as billionaire Republican campaign donor David Koch revealed what had long been suspected – and in the governor's own words. The governor's belligerence is less about a budget deficit than it is about an effort to break up unions that Mr. Walker hopes will spread to other states with Republican governors. The fawning nature of the governor's half of the dialogue with Mr. “Koch” exposed him as just another conservative lap dog whose allegiance is not to voters but to deep-pocketed, right-wing special interests.

The unfortunate reluctance of some unions, in particular public employee unions, to adapt to economic realities, left them vulnerable to an attack from the right. In Massachusetts last year, we saw the sorry spectacle of construction union members heckling those who dared point out at public hearings that casinos were bad for the state. The State Police Association was so angry at Governor Deval Patrick for challenging a cherished perk by changing state rules to allow civilian flaggers to direct traffic at many construction sites that the union endorsed Republican challenger Charles Baker, who if elected would more than likely be part of Governor Walker's union-busting campaign today. In trying to take advantage of unhappiness with unions, however, Republicans have typically over-reached and risked creating a pro-union backlash. Americans who can remember back

two years know that it was the Wall Street fat cats protected then and now by Republicans who brought down the economy. Two years later, the unions are scapegoated for it.

His well-documented disputes with unions aside, Massachusetts' Democratic governor defended unions Tuesday when he spoke at a rally for Wisconsin's unions held at the Statehouse by unionized state workers. Deploring the ongoing attacks on public sector workers, Governor Patrick said that “the voice of working people has been, and will be, at the table.” Which invites the question of how the working people became the enemy in a nation comprised of working people? One reason is that fewer and fewer working people are members of unions, and the arrogance of union leadership is another. A major reason, too, is the relentless union-bashing by powerful corporate interests, like the Koch brothers, their favored politicians and the right-wing media.

This is a good time for Americans, whether or not they belong to unions, are retired, or are in school preparing for the work place, to acknowledge what they owe to unions. The minimum wage, worker's compensation, paid sick days, 401(k)s, unemployment insurance and equal pay for women and minorities are among the workers' rights that unions successfully fought for. Is there a worker out there, union or otherwise, ready to give up any of those hard-earned benefits?

Yes, unions are far too often their own worst enemy. But when politicians bankrolled by wealthy corporate interests trash unions representing middle class workers and try to steal their rights, Americans should think carefully about whose side they want to be on.



“A unionized public employee, a Tea Party activist and a CEO are sitting at a table with a plate of a dozen cookies in the middle of it. The CEO takes 11 of the cookies, turns to the Tea Party activist and says “Watch out for that union guy. He wants a piece of your cookie.””

