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The Message From Wisconsin

When Gov. Scott Walker moved to [strip Wisconsin public employees of their collective-bargaining rights last year](#), a few weeks after taking office, it was clear that he wasn't doing it to save the state money. If that had been the case, he would have accepted the unions' agreement to pay far more in health care and pension costs. His real goal was political: to break the unions by demonizing their "bosses," ending their ability even to collect dues and removing them as a source of money and energy for Democrats.

On Tuesday, [as Mr. Walker easily fought off a recall](#) by a 7-point margin over his challenger, it became clear just how effective that strategy has been.

To start, labor failed to nominate its preferred candidate last month to run against [Mr. Walker](#). Instead, Democrats chose [Mayor Tom Barrett of Milwaukee](#), who then barely talked about collective-bargaining rights, sensing it would not help him. Nearly a third of union voters (presumably from private-sector unions) voted for Mr. Walker, [exit polls showed](#), as did nearly half of voters from union households who were not union members.

Some of those union voters, like many others, undoubtedly felt that recalls should be reserved for official misconduct. But, clearly, over the course of 18 months, Mr. Walker and his allies managed to convince even union households in a former labor bastion that bargaining rights for public sector employees were bad for the state.

How did he do that? With the aid of more than \$45.6 million, [most of it from outside the state](#), that paid for ads praising him for his "courage" in taking on unions and attacking labor for its "selfish" intransigence. As [one ad](#) put it, "Labor union mobs led by Barack Obama's Organizing for America are trying to intimidate and harass Governor Walker and lawmakers in Madison, simply because they're finally doing the right thing."

Mr. Walker's campaign raised seven times as much money as Mr. Barrett's, much of it in six-figure checks from some of the same business interests contributing millions to Republican "super PACs" and advocacy groups this year, including Sheldon Adelson and Bob Perry.

This money has by no means bought a guarantee that Mitt Romney will seize Wisconsin in November; [exit polls showed](#) the same voters preferred President Obama by 51 percent to 44 percent. The state is improving economically, with a lower jobless rate than the nation, which may benefit the president as much as Mr. Romney.

But, from the beginning, the money behind Governor Walker was intended to turn a once-reliable blue state into a laboratory for Republican ideas, where business could grow free of union fetters, taxes could be cut and thousands of people could be removed from Medicaid rolls.

That's why David Koch, the billionaire industrialist [whose family money was crucial to Mr. Walker's election in 2010](#), gave [\\$1 million](#) to the Republican Governors Association this year, which, in turn, ran ads supporting Mr. Walker. Mr. Koch said Mr. Walker's fight against public unions was "[critically important.](#)"

The tactics worked in Wisconsin, and in several other states. Labor, so long in decline in the private sector, is also losing its clout in states and cities, unable to match or withstand the unfettered bank accounts of industry. The people who kept Mr. Walker and his policies in power are just getting started.