

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

February 17, 2011 at 1:27pm

Wis. governor gets people walkin' (and marchin')

by Mike Sweitzer-Beckman

It's February in Wisconsin, and people here are steaming ? mad as hell that newly-elected Gov. Scott Walker has decided to propose a new state budget that dismisses pension benefits for public employees. That's a result of his approach, but it is indeed his approach that has everyone up in arms. He created this new budget proposal without even a phone call to the teachers' unions around the state, thus eliminating collective bargaining.

These cuts would affect all public employees in Wisconsin except for police and fire union members. These unions supported Tom Barrett, Walker's opponent in last November's election, so Walker isn't playing favoritism. He said that cutting benefits for these workers would create an unsafe state - and then threatened to call in the National Guard if the going got tough with teachers and other public servants protesting.

It's true: Wisconsin's budget is in peril and Walker was elected on the promise of finding a new approach to balancing it. He has declared that Wisconsin is "open for business" and is hoping to lure Illinois companies over the state line to establish their headquarters here.

The past week has seen protests and testifying in front of the congressional finance committee in the spirit of former Wisconsin senator (Fighting) Bob LaFollette. Testimony went well into the night on Tuesday as nobody would be sent home who wanted to testify. And Wednesday saw an organized "sickout" where 40 percent of Madison teachers called in sick, causing the need for the school district to cancel classes for the day. An estimated 10,000 gathered at the state capitol on Wednesday, primarily teachers with their kids as well as high school students who came to support their teachers. Another 3,000 gathered inside to listen to congressional discussions.

As Madison West High School teacher Betsy Barnard said in the Wisconsin State Journal, "This is the

scariest thing I've ever seen. This is going to change Wisconsin forever. Barnard doesn't seem unreasonable. She understands that the budget needs to be balanced, and that everyone needs to sacrifice in order to make that happen. She is personally willing to sacrifice to help balance the budget. But she, like so many other hard-working people in Wisconsin, wants to be able to collectively bargain and have a voice in the process.

Everyone is coming out of the woodwork to criticize Scott Walker for his approach. The normally reserved state senator Fred Risser commented on Walker's dictator approach to this issue. And on Wednesday, the day of the largest gatherings of protesters, former US senator Russ Feingold launched his new organization, Progressives United, and criticized what Walker is doing to destroy labor unions in Wisconsin that have taken 50 years to get here. Even current and former Green Bay Packers players have gotten in the mix of criticizing Walker's approach -- and this is the Super Bowl-winning team that Walker oozed about during his first State of the State address in January.

This is not just a problem in Wisconsin. The Chicago-based group Interfaith Worker Justice warned yesterday in a media release and statement from its board of Directors that the rights of public workers are under attack in several states. Furthermore, bills that would roll back labor rights and wage standards have been introduced or will soon be introduced in 25 states, the workers' group reports.

To take just one example, Tennessee's Legislature will soon consider bills that would curtail the rights of teachers and prohibit them from collective bargaining.

"Tennessee State Senators are trying to ram through legislation this week attacking school teachers," the release from Interfaith Work Justice quotes the Rev. Jim Sessions of Interfaith Worker Justice of East Tennessee.

"They want to turn the clock back 50 years, when teachers had no right to organize and salaries were so low because the mainly female workforce wasn't supposed to need much money, as they were provided for by their husbands," he said.

"Those times are gone, teachers have won dignity on the job, and we need to move forward, not backward," said Sessions, a United Methodist minister.

"Rather than pushing down standards for public workers, all workers should be valued and achieve respect at the workplace," reads the Interfaith Worker Justice board statement,

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Back in Wisconsin, Catholic church leaders are also weighing in on Walker's approach to negotiating with the unions (or rather, his non-approach). Archbishop Jerome Listeki, president of the Wisconsin Catholic Conference, issued a statement on Wednesday about the messy labor relations. He acknowledges that labor unions are not always right, but cites the 1981 document *Laborem Exercens* by Pope John Paul II: "[a] union remains a constructive factor of social order and solidarity, and it is impossible to ignore it." He goes on to request open lines of communication and cooperation in order for Wisconsin to balance the budget.

If the governor won't make a phone call and sit down with the unions, there isn't much more they can do other than vent their frustration in protest. There is talk of the teachers coordinating a second day of calling in sick in order to provide more testimony on the day of the state's budget vote. It's a sad time for

the state, which seems more closed for business than open.

Editor's Note: As this column was being posted, the following story came over The Associated Press News wire: Dems missing from Wis. Capitol ahead of union vote. Republicans hold a 19-14 majority in the Senate, but they need at least one Democrat to be present before taking a vote on the bill.

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