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Wisconsin & The Dems Opportunity

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Distinctly Catholic

Well, the Wisconsin Republicans finally showed their true colors. In a brazen, and potentially unconstitutional, move, yesterday they stripped the provisions eliminating collective bargaining rights for most state employees from the budget bill, avoiding the necessity of a three-fifths quorum, and then passed the union-busting bill as a stand alone measure.

This is in direct contradiction to the values set forth by the Wisconsin bishops, who had written to the state legislators arguing that the budget such not be balanced by stealing away fundamental rights to organize and collectively bargain. Indeed, as the bishops acknowledged, the need to balance the budget might require some concessions from all, but it cannot entail abandonment of a fundamental right. The Wisconsin State Senate has gone one further. It has attacked the fundamental rights of workers in a way that is unrelated to the budget at all. Governor Scott Walker is expected to sign the measure as soon as it clears the GOP-controlled House.

The GOP's move also flies in the face of every public opinion poll. All of the polls, even those sponsored by the GOP, have shown that the public wanted the Republicans and Democrats to compromise. All of the polls showed that while there was widespread support for concessions from the unions on pensions and health care benefits to help balance the budget, voters did not want the unions stripped of their rights.

So, why did they do it? The dynamic in Madison is the same as the dynamic in Washington. The squeaky wheel gets the oil, and no group is squeakier than the Tea Party fanatics who supported the attack on unions. The Republicans in Wisconsin, like the House Republicans in Washington, are responding to their base. They fear, above all, a primary challenge from the right.

What the Republicans are risking, however, is alienating both swing voters who want compromise, almost as a matter of principle, and an increasingly core part of the GOP electorate: white, working class voters.

As E. J. Dionne writes in this morning's Washington Post, "For the first time in a long time, blue-collar Republicans — once known as Reagan Democrats — have been encouraged to remember what they think is wrong with conservative ideology. Working-class voters, including many Republicans, want no part of Walker's war."

The Democrats have been handed a great opportunity, but if they are to capitalize on it, it will require them to evidence something that has been lacking in the Party for some time: Message discipline. The President and the Democrats in Wisconsin and the Democratic leadership in Congress must get on the same page. They must talk only, repeat only, about the economic issues facing middle and working class voters. No more foolishness about DOMA. Nix the awards ceremonies for Motown — and I love Motown. Stop with the emails about protecting a woman's right to abortion. Talk jobs, jobs, jobs. Talk protecting Social Security by raising taxes on the super-rich. Talk about pensions versus tax breaks for oil companies. Stay in specifics. People like the idea of budget cutting, but they hate the particulars of budget cutting.

Some will see this proposal as dodging the need for presidential leadership on the long-term budget difficulties facing the nation. Of course, I do not recall any howls when George W. Bush busted the budget surpluses with huge tax cuts for the wealthy. But, charges of hypocrisy only get you so far. Better for Democrats to perform the highest form of flattery: imitation. Ignore the long-term budget likes the Republicans do until you can frame the issues involved in ways that work to your favor. That will require framing the budget debate in terms of particular choices: Social Security versus tax cuts for the rich. Medicare versus subsidies for big oil. Workers' rights versus corporate regulations. Revenue versus cuts.

The Wisconsin GOP has given the Democrats a chance to win back those working class voters who have been drifting away since Reagan. They have over-reached. With a bit of discipline, the Democrats can reclaim their heritage as the party of the little guy.

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