

The Wisconsin Recall & What It Means

Michael Sean Winters | Aug. 10, 2011 | Distinctly Catholic

The results from the special elections in Wisconsin were decidedly mixed yesterday. Six Republican state senators were subject to a recall election and four survived the ordeal. In two districts, the Democrats won the seats back, but the GOP maintained control of the state senate.

The vote was, mostly, a referendum on Gov. Scott Walker and specifically his union busting legislation that passed after much acrimony earlier this year. More than \$30 million dollars were spent on the special elections, which must be some kind of record for state legislative races. That is a lot of ads, a lot of messages, and so it is difficult to say that this one message or another triumphed over the others, especially when the results were so mixed.

Nonetheless, the results are deeply worrying for a variety of reasons. In 2008, Barack Obama won the Badger state with 56 percent of the vote to John McCain 42 percent. Wisconsin was as blue as blue could be. But, Obama won because he persuaded enough white, working class voters to back his candidacy. Those voters have been profoundly alienated by the Democrats, in part because of the lousy economy and in part because, once elected, Obama has developed something of a tin ear for the concerns of white, working class voters. They are not people Tim Geithner hangs out with on a regular basis, nor any of the President's other economic advisors. And, Obama, has morphed himself from the champion of change into the nation's professor, presenting a cool, aloof demeanor at all times instead of being, and being seen as, the champion of those working class voters who feel abandoned by time.

Secondly, the results show that, even in a once heavily unionized state like Wisconsin, unions lack the political punch they once had. A narrative has developed that sees unions as uniquely parochial in their concerns. I believe that narrative is wrong, but it is there and it must be addressed. In Wisconsin, Gov. Walker's attack focused on state employees whose benefits were significantly more generous than those available in the private sector. Never mind that those benefits were achieved in the past in place of wage increases. Never mind that your average state employee has a higher degree of education and expertise than private sector employees. The fact that successful unions help raise everyone's wages is not part of that narrative. The fact that union efforts to improve worker safety have a spill-over effect for non-union employees is not part of that narrative. The fact that unions ? and the Catholic Church ? helped create the 40 hour work week, led the push to eliminate child labor, and were critical in the passage of such important social programs as unemployment insurance, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid, that is not part of the narrative. Instead, people see jobs fleeing states like Wisconsin for low wage, right-to-work states like South Carolina, and they believe unions are part of the problem of economic decline.

President Obama, like Presidents Clinton and Carter before him, only talk about unions when they are addressing a union audience. Democratic congressional candidates pay a great deal of attention to unions for the same reason Republicans pay a great deal of attention to the Tea Party: So many gerrymandered districts result in Democratic and Republican congressional candidates worried only about a primary challenge, in which unions and the Tea Party are all powerful. Consequently, little time is spent trying to convince moderate,

centrist voters of the importance of unions, of their value, not only to their own employees but to the whole society. Few candidates for Congress have to persuade those who don't already think as they do. The competing narratives become hardened.

The Catholic Church must reclaim its historical support for organized labor, support that has been lost as more and more prelates wish to focus solely on abortion and other moral issues in the public square. Note to hierarchs: We can multi-task here. We voters can care about abortion and about workers' rights. The Church supports unions because they are precisely the kind of intermediate social organization called for by the principle of subsidiarity and they exemplify another key principle of Catholic social teaching, solidarity. It is amazing to me that any Catholic would presume to minimize the Church's historic support for unions. Consider these words of Blessed Pope John Paul II in *Laborem Exercens*:

?In order to achieve social justice in the various parts of the world, in the various countries, and in the relationships between them, there is a need for ever new movements of solidarity of the workers and with the workers. This solidarity must be present whenever it is called for by the social degrading of the subject of work, by exploitation of the workers, and by the growing areas of poverty and even hunger. The Church is firmly committed to this cause, for she considers it her mission, her service, a proof of her fidelity to Christ, so that she can truly be the ?Church of the poor?.

Blessed Pope John Paul II was not talking about the Tea Party in that passage, he was walking about unions.

I am proud to say I joined a union on my sixteenth birthday. In college, I read *Rerum Novarum*, the seminal text of Catholic social teaching, with its strong support for unions, which in 1891 was more than a little controversial, and I was hooked even more. Then, I learned about Cardinal James Gibbons of Baltimore and Archbishop Edward Hanna of San Francisco and Cardinal Manning of Westminster, and a host of other pro-labor prelates. Then, I watched *Solidarnosc*, the labor movement in Poland, aided by both the Church and the AFL-CIO, as it hammered away at the foundations of the communist state. I learned about how the close collaboration between the Church and organized labor in this country helped prevent any kind of communist party from emerging in America. The Church's support for organized labor is one of its proudest chapters ? and in those countries where the bishops did not stand with the workers, unsurprisingly, Mass attendance plummeted and the Church lost the working class.

Sadly, that tradition seems dormant today. Ask yourself: When was the last time you heard a sermon about the rights of workers in your parish? When was the last time you received a pastoral letter from your bishop on labor?

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