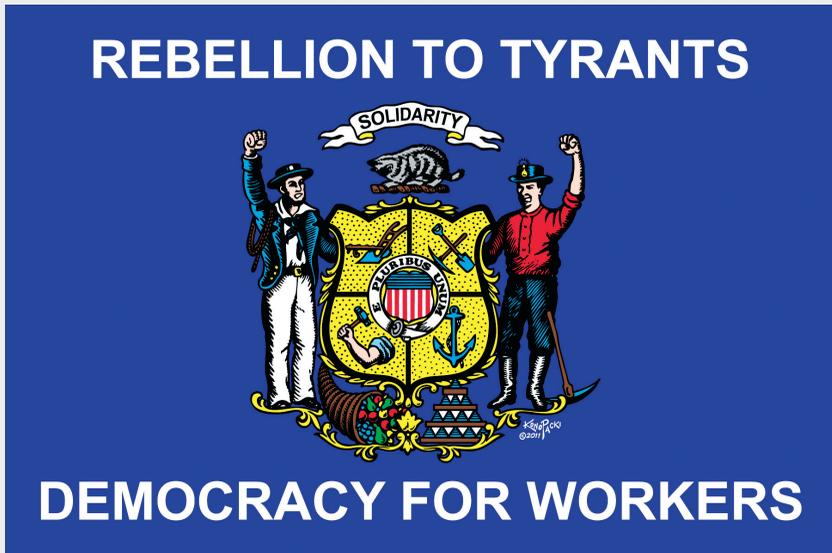


Peter Rachleff

“Rebellion to Tyrants, Democracy for Workers”:
The Madison Uprising, Collective Bargaining,
and the Future of the Labor Movement

When I walked into the Madison Labor Temple in April 2011, an enormous bright blue banner on the wall behind the podium caught my eye. From a distance it looked like the Wisconsin state seal, but on closer inspection, important transformations were apparent. *Solidarity* had replaced the watchword *Forward*; the figures of the sailor and the miner, formerly at ease, now raised clenched fists; and the motto Rebellion to Tyrants, Democracy for Workers leapt out in white block letters. For me, a labor historian, this banner evoked the one carried by the Philadelphia bricklayers' union, leading the 1788 parade celebrating the ratification of the US constitution: Both Buildings and Governments Are the Work of Our Hands.

The Madison banner, made by veteran local cartoonist, artist, and activist Mike Konopacki, signified a more complex relationship to “democracy” than did the Philadelphia one. Democracy has not just been about the methods of selecting political leaders, but it has also informed visions of how to organize work, how to distribute material resources across society, and even how to construct cultural representations and tell society's stories. At times, social and political movements have been informed by an awareness of the intersections of these spheres. Democracy has been an alternative to autocracy in the search for structures and practices through which power is wielded, and truth be told, it has ebbed and flowed throughout our history. The Wisconsin struggle has demonstrated how democracy can serve as both the process and the goal of a revived labor movement in the United States.



Mike Konopacki, Wisconsin Rebel Flag, 2011

For eighteenth-century artisans, their economic independence, individually as well as collectively, gave them political voice and the confidence that such a voice would be heard. A century later, the Industrial Revolution had undermined workers' independence in the work process; shifted the coercive powers of government, such as the courts, police, and military, out of workers' hands; and left insulated from their grasp the private sources of power held by employers, banks, contracts, charities, and relief. After a careful analysis of the unfolding of this process in his book *Citizen Worker*, David Montgomery concludes, "The most urgent question facing workers' movements in North America and Europe as the new century dawned, therefore, was whether democracy could be rescued by extending its scope into the forbidden gardens of the market itself."¹

While Montgomery wrote of the transition from the nineteenth century to the twentieth, it is hard not to think of a more recent transition, from the twentieth century to the twenty-first. The labor movement has been in a tailspin for four decades. The unionized part of the workforce has plummeted from 30 percent to less than 10 percent, while the number of strikes with more than one thousand participants has shriveled from four hundred per year to fewer than ten. Political officeholders, the mainstream media, and even our popular culture have turned their backs on workers

and unions. Every measurable category of labor economics screams out the consequences for workers: wages, pensions, health benefits, and job security have declined, while productivity and profits have boomed. Over this forty-year period, the United States has become the most unequal advanced industrial country in the world.² While workers have tried to keep up by selling more labor on the market, the wealthy have had more disposable income to pump into politics, think tanks, and the media. Labor’s weakness in the economic arena has generated further weakness in the political sphere.

This situation was not created by some “invisible hand.” In the early 1970s, Keynesian economic practice imploded; worker militancy arose in the manufacturing sector and spread into the public sphere; the Japanese and West German economies emerged as serious threats to US business; and corporate executives, bankers, and veteran politicians moved, piecemeal, toward a paradigm shift. They sought to jettison Keynesianism’s “demand side” and regulatory orientation, an approach to political economy that had diminished inequality, infringed on corporate decision making, and seemed caught in a morass of “stagflation.” Amid claims that Keynesianism could no longer promote macroeconomic growth, its corporate, media, academic, and political critics called for a new orientation, one that would promote free trade, deregulation, and the privatization of government services. In 1978, UAW president Doug Fraser resigned from Jimmy Carter’s Labor-Management Group, warning that “the leaders of the business community, with few exceptions, have chosen to wage a one-sided class war in this country.”³ The Reagan years brought overt attacks on unions and government alike, along with the promotion of tax policies that rewarded the rich. By the late 1980s these policies had a coherence and a name—*neoliberalism*—and clear consequences: a global race-to-the-bottom for workers and access to greater wealth for the already wealthy.⁴

Collective bargaining, the path to a degree of economic democracy won by private sector workers between 1934 and 1945 (unions grew from about 2 million members to 14.5 million) and public sector workers from 1955 to 1975 (municipal, state, and federal unions grew from fewer than 0.5 million to 4 million), did not provide workers and unions with effective resistance to the new offensive launched by capital and the state.⁵ While collective bargaining gave unions some voice and workers some protections, its key ground rules, as established by the Wagner Act of 1935, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947, and several court decisions, denied unions access to some of their most effective tactics (sympathy strikes, secondary boycotts,

sit-down strikes, and mass picket lines) while they protected employers' tools (the right to fire strikers, close plants, and introduce new technologies). These ground rules also encouraged unions to trade the right to strike for arbitration, to rely on the corporate payroll office to collect union dues, to reduce the presence of stewards in the workplace, and to expand the corporate bureaucracy of full-time officers, lobbyists, lawyers, and paid staff. When employers in both the private and public sectors took that neoliberal turn in the 1980s, buttressed by legal specialists in "union avoidance" or outright union busting, most unions crumpled. Some invoked the explicit and implicit protections embodied in their collective bargaining rights, but found little help there. Those who wanted to fight back found their ability to resist undermined by decades of adapting to these ground rules. Union officers complained that their members saw the union as an insurance company, while rank-and-filers complained that officers had become bureaucrats with no appreciation for the realities of the workplace. Both were right.

While neoliberalism was successful at shifting power and wealth from workers to employers, it was not able to escape the immanent laws of capitalism. Sooner or later another crisis would arise. The Wall Street and Main Street crashes of 2007–2008 and the ensuing "Great Recession" have revealed the limits of neoliberalism. The determination of its architects and beneficiaries to place the burdens of this crisis on the backs of workers, who have already been shouldering far more than their share of the economic burden and who bear no responsibility for the crisis, is proving to be a tough sell. In fact, neoliberalism's frontal attack on the providers of services as well as those who depend on those services—on consumers, students, citizens, and workers—has laid the foundation for a broad social movement.

This is where the Wisconsin struggle looms large.

In the fall of 2010, as part of the Republican shellacking visited on Democrats, the GOP gained control of both houses of Wisconsin's legislature as well as the governor's office. Scott Walker, a product of the white flight that has built suburban Milwaukee into a bastion of right-wing talk radio and Tea Partyism, became governor. Shortly after assuming office, he ordered signs posted at highway entrances to the state announcing, Wisconsin Is Open for Business. He extended \$140 million in tax breaks to promote business, announced that the state faced a budget deficit crisis of \$135 million, and introduced a "budget deficit repair" bill that would cut state workers' wages and benefits in order to balance the budget. The bill

proposed to prohibit public unions from bargaining on any issue except wages, limit contracts to one year, require contracts to be “recertified” every year, block the union from collecting agency fees from nonmembers whom they would still be required to represent, end the dues checkoff via payroll deductions, and remove all bargaining rights from University of Wisconsin faculty. The bill also included higher health care contributions from workers, which cut take-home pay by 7 to 11 percent. Walker insisted that wage, benefit, and pension cuts could be implemented only if the unions were stripped of their powers. The “budget deficit repair” bill also allowed the state to sell its heating plants without a competitive bidding process. The bill exempted police and firefighters and their unions from these impositions and cuts, which would lead to important twists and turns as the struggle unfolded. Walker and his legislative allies also publicly discussed other possible bills—a “right to work” bill that would have attacked private-sector unions, a bill to separate the flagship Madison campus from the rest of the University of Wisconsin system, cuts in state spending on Medicaid and funding for K-12 education and technical colleges, and cuts in aid to local governments.

Walker’s budget repair bill generated the greatest labor uprising in the United States in more than seventy years. To be sure, governors in other states had ridden the wave of Republican, neoliberal, antigovernment, and Tea Party passions to propose—and even implement—cuts in services, on the one hand, and in the numbers and compensation of public employees, on the other. But no one had ever demanded so much in so short a time; no one had tried to make these economic cuts while engaging a discourse of rights. Yes, Wisconsin had been swept by the Republicans in 2010, and it had provided the soil that gave rise to Joe McCarthy, but it also had its own complex history, which came to bear on the struggle. The American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees had organized its first local in Wisconsin in the 1930s, and in 1959, Wisconsin was the first state to extend collective bargaining to public employees.

Knowledge of these benchmarks was kept alive by generations of labor historians who sought—and reached—the public’s ear. The Madison campus of the University of Wisconsin was known as the birthplace of academic labor history, the home of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, the repository for the country’s longest-established labor archives, while the Wisconsin Labor History Society (WLHS) has been a national role model. Not only did it lead a decade of lobbying to pass, only two years ago, a state law requiring labor history to be taught as part of the standard

social studies curriculum, but during the 2011 struggle, it produced a daily e-newsletter with accurate reports on unfolding events. A new generation of labor historians has worked with WLHS to promote labor history essay contests for high school and college students and to shape the telling of key stories such as the Bay View Massacre of 1886 (during the struggle for the eight-hour day), Milwaukee's election of twelve socialist mayors in the twentieth century, the four-year Kohler strike of the mid-1950s (the longest strike in US labor history), and the Cudahy meatpacking strike of the late 1980s. In March 2011, while the newly elected governor of Maine was taking down a labor history mural in that state's Department of Labor offices, the Wisconsin South Central Federation of Labor was unveiling its newly completed mural in the Madison Labor Temple.

Let's not forget that the University of Wisconsin had been the site of not only a dynamic antiwar movement in the 1960s and 1970s but also the nation's first graduate student union to build a permanent presence in the labor movement. The Teaching Assistants' Association (TAA), whose president David Newby would serve as president of the Wisconsin AFL-CIO for more than two decades, played a major role in the 2011 struggle. More than a few of the Madison labor activists had been UW-Madison students in the activist heyday, and they continued to value and apply those experiences in the labor movement. So Wisconsin in general and Madison in particular had a lot of historical experience with which to resist Governor Walker and the Republican agenda.

Resist they did—and out of the resistance grew a social movement. Walker submitted his bill on Friday, February 11. The TAA led student groups in campus organizing over the weekend. On Monday—Valentine's Day—two thousand students showed up at the Capitol to deliver cards to Walker: "I Love UW—Don't Break My Heart." The next day, public employees joined the students, and thirteen thousand demonstrated against the bill. Some were able to testify to the legislature's joint finance committee. Their stories, told in two-minute time blocks, moved the audience, thousands of whom rotated through the chambers. Over the ensuing days and nights a community formed in the state capitol. "Nobody had set out to say, 'We are going to occupy our state capitol,'" explained one graduate student, but some chose to stay in order to be in line to speak in the public hearing. Experienced activists, led by the TAA, set up a command center to coordinate press calls, update websites and social media, and explore what would be needed to undertake a long stay. Local businesses provided food, while supporters from outside Madison, some as far away as Cairo, called in

orders for the protesters, many of whom had been inspired by the images they had seen and the stories they had heard from the demonstrations in Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. The possibility of change had become real.

The occupation of the capitol deepened. The command center coordinated trash cleanup and sleeping arrangements, and organized child care. Handwritten signs appeared all around the building, held by blue painters' tape. Many participants cited these signs as democratic vehicles of expression. Some protesters organized impromptu marches around the rotunda and the inner floors of the capitol. “This is what democracy looks like” became the most popular chant and the movement's declaration of itself. An open-microphone space in one part of the rotunda offered a platform for the expression and debate of ideas from morning to night. Next to it, a drum circle kept up its rhythms, pausing to provide quiet for the speakers. Unions—both private and public sector—organized members to participate in shifts in the “occupation,” some staying overnight. That first week, so many public school teachers, not just in Madison but around the state, called in sick and came to the capitol to protest that numerous schools had to close. Rank-and-file teachers were responding to the governor's threat to take away their right to strike by refusing to work, by striking. Protesters rallied around the state and stood with handwritten signs on highway overpasses. Over the next month, faculty at six of the University of Wisconsin system's branch campuses responded to the governor's threat to take away their right to collective bargaining by unionizing for the first time. Among the unexpected heroes were the firefighters and the police (particularly the Madison and capitol forces), who rejected the governor's proposal to insulate them from the budget repair bill. The firefighters, complete with a bag-piper, led some of the parades, to enthusiastic responses from the other protesters. The capitol and local police assisted the occupiers with the delivery and distribution of food and, on several occasions, resisted orders to expel protesters.

Saturdays became the days for mass rallies, much as Fridays had been in Egypt, Bahrain, Yemen, Libya, and Syria. For weeks, crowds estimated at 60,000 to 125,000 encircled the capitol. Their chant of “This is what democracy looks like” caught on with local cab drivers, who honked their horns in rhythm. One Saturday, dozens of farmers arrived on tractors, circling the capitol slowly to the cheers of the crowd. National union leaders, political figures, singers, and members of the publicly owned Green Bay Packers football team came to the capitol and spoke or performed for the crowd. One Madison labor activist e-mailed me: “Imagine 300 marching

uniformed prison guards in full throat chanting ‘This is what democracy looks like!’ and Tom Morrello on stage for a noon rally on a bitter cold day doing 5 songs to the point where his fingers were numb, and concluding by getting 15,000 largely blue-collar building trades workers to sing along with him ‘This land is your land.’ It was pretty goddam moving personally (this IS what democracy looks like).”⁶ The synergy between the daily occupation and the Saturday rallies was creating an empowering and transformative experience for many of the participants, who included public and private sector trade unionists, nonunion workers, college and high school students, recipients of the services provided by public employees, immigrants and immigrants’ rights activists, civil rights and peace-and-justice activists, out-of-town visitors, and more.

While the expressed purpose of the protests was to “kill the bill,” a social movement with organized labor at its center but many other constituencies deeply involved was taking shape. The fourteen Democratic state senators provoked a political standoff when they realized that, while they could be outvoted on the bill, their absence would deny the quorum needed to vote on any fiscal bill. They scattered to neighboring states, adding a new layer of drama and giving the capitol struggle the air of a political strike. It also bought the movement more time, during which activists explored a variety of strategies. Some threw their energy into JoAnne Kloppenburg’s campaign to unseat state supreme court judge David Prosser in an early April election, casting her campaign as a referendum on the budget bill. Tens of thousands of signatures, targeting half a dozen Republican senators in districts across the state, were collected by late spring, leading to run-off elections in the early fall. Whether the incumbents can be defeated, whether the outcomes of special elections will tip the majority balance in the Wisconsin legislature, and whether newly elected democrats can be counted on to repeal the “budget repair bill” remains to be seen. While these political campaigns might have limited practical outcome, they have provided a platform for activists to have conversations with their neighbors and fellow workers, thus extending the movement.

There were wide-ranging discussions within the labor movement. On the one hand, some local public sector union leaders moved quickly to reach contract agreements with municipal authorities and school boards, offering significant monetary concessions in exchange for preserving their unions’ collective bargaining rights. On the other hand, National Nurses United (NNU) launched a campaign, Say NO to Concessions. “Working people did not create the recession or the budgetary crisis facing federal,

state, and local governments,” argued NNU executive director Rose Ann DeMoro, “and there can be no more concessions, period.”⁷ The six-county South Central Federation of Labor (ninety-seven unions with forty-five thousand members) agreed, and it investigated the histories of general strikes in the United States and Canada, held a discussion of the topic, and passed a resolution calling for the education of its members about the use of this tactic. The federation’s monthly newspaper, the *Union Labor News*, published substantial articles on the topic in its April issue. An outpouring of Wisconsin unions, workers, and civil rights activists turned out on April 4 (the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King’s death during the Memphis sanitation workers’ strike in 1968) for We Are One marches and rallies nationally coordinated by the Communications Workers of America, the AFL-CIO, and the NAACP. In some public sector unions, officers and staff planned training to move to one-on-one collection of dues. In an action aimed at M and I Bank, a financial backer of the Republican agenda, public employees, led by firefighters, withdrew hundreds of thousands of dollars from their accounts. Labor Forward activists (a network of local union officers) turned to national think tank Labor Notes to help organize a Troublemakers’ School to deepen their political-economic analysis, explore the intersections between the Wisconsin uprising and the immigrant rights struggle, and discuss the implications of all these developments for the future of the US labor movement. On May 1, forty thousand or more marched in both Madison and Milwaukee in events specifically linking labor rights and immigrants’ rights.

Through the spring (when this article is being written) there continue to be protests, festivals, marches, rallies, activities, and discussions, many of which are highly creative and deeply participative. Although these activities have not killed the bill nor had much impact on the balance of power in state government, they have demonstrated the continuing life of the movement, and they have generated continuing, even deepening, consciousness and connection for its diverse heart, a twenty-first-century version of that eighteenth-century “motley crew” of colonial revolutionaries brought to our attention by historians Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker.⁸ The Wisconsin struggle has demonstrated, as Michael Hardt argues in his introduction to a newly published edition of the Declaration of Independence: “The real core revolutionary event is the metamorphosis of the multitude, in developing the skills, the knowledges, and habits necessary to rule itself without masters, along with the expansion of its imagination and desire for democracy.”⁹

Wisconsin's spring, like the Arab spring sweeping North Africa and the so-called Middle East, offers inspiration to a labor movement that had long seemed on its last legs. As it stands up, it transforms itself. As it seeks democracy, it practices democracy, in ways that would have been not merely understood but enthusiastically celebrated by its eighteenth-century forebears: "Rebellion to Tyrants, Democracy for Workers!"

Notes

- 1 David Montgomery, *Citizen Worker: The Experience of Workers in the United States with Democracy and the Free Market during the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 162.
- 2 Jodie T. Allen and Michael Dimock, "A Nation of 'Haves' and 'Have-Nots?' Far More Americans Now See Their Country as Sharply Divided along Economic Lines," Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, September 13, 2007. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/593.have-have-nots>. Also see *Too Much: A Commentary of Economic Inequality*, <http://toomuchonline.org> (accessed August 18, 2011).
- 3 Doug Fraser, den: labor quotes: class, www.ks.uiuc.edu/~braun/personal/den/labor/quotes/class.html (accessed August 18, 2011).
- 4 For an explanation of the rise and evolution of neoliberalism, see David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007). For an analysis of the impact of neoliberalism on US politics and the impact of US politics on neoliberalism, see Jacob S. Hacker and Paul Pierson, *Winner Take All Politics: How Washington Made the Rich Richer—And Turned Its Back on the Middle Class* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010).
- 5 For the best account of federal and state government regulation of the collective bargaining rights of public employees, see Joseph A. McCartin, "'A Wagner Act for Public Employees': Labor's Deferred Dream and the Rise of Conservatism, 1970–1976," *Journal of American History* 95, no. 1 (2008): 123–48.
- 6 Dave Poklinkoski, president of IBEW Local 2304, Madison, personal e-mail to author, May 11, 2011.
- 7 Rose Ann DeMoro, "Just Say No—No More Cuts for Workers," *Huffington Post*, February 21, 2011, www.huffingtonpost.com/rose-ann-demoro/just-say-no-no-more-cuts_b_826159.html.
- 8 Marcus Rediker and Peter Linebaugh, *The Many-Headed Hydra: Sailors, Slaves, Commoners, and the Hidden History of the Revolutionary Atlantic* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001).
- 9 Michael Hardt, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: The Declaration of Independence* (London: Verso, 2007), xxii.