

SECOND OPINION

Public unions aren't the bad guys



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From Wisconsin to Indiana to Ohio, sweeping across the nation's heartland like an antipopulist prairie fire, Republican governors are taking aim at public workers and their unions. This attack on public employees and collective bargaining rights is divorced from current economic realities and recent history, and it threatens democratic institutions and middle-class values across the nation. If public employee unions are ground into the dust, we will gain little and lose much.

When the economy slumped in 2008, most Americans knew what caused our problems — deregulated banks had played fast and loose with mortgages and exotic “financial instruments.” An enormous bubble in housing prices burst and took

the entire economy down with it. Today, just three years later, conservative pundits want to feed us all a whole new story with no basis in facts — our problems, especially the red ink hemorrhaging out of state budgets, are all caused by public workers and their greedy unions.

We are told that states and municipalities across the nation have a “spending problem,” not a “revenue problem.” Again, this assertion is utter nonsense without any grounding in the economy today. Most states have already slashed budgets in recent years; there is no “run-away” spending unless you count paying to keep schools open, roads paved, and poor children fed as waste and fraud. State revenues continue to decline because we still suffer the

consequences of greedy bankers riding the economy off the rails. People remain out of work and have less money to spend; thus, states take in less revenue through income and sales taxes. Public workers and their unions had nothing to do with creating this Great Recession. Many of these unions have already made concessions on pay and benefits to help ease budget deficits, and now they are told to give up their basic rights because politicians do not have the ounce of courage it takes to ask the wealthy in this country to pay a little more in taxes to avoid further cuts in essential services.

What is really going on in the Midwest is an assault on the core principle of public workers' rights to collectively bargain — a right recognized by nations across the globe and denied usually only by autocratic regimes who want

to squelch democratic dissent.

Some North Carolinians might respond that our own state bans collective bargaining by all public employees; have we suffered any negative consequences? A brief comparison with Wisconsin shows that North Carolina's ban on such bargaining rights and long history of hostility to all unions has left the Old North State with equally gaping holes in its budget and a higher unemployment rate!

In 1959, Wisconsin first granted local public employees collective bargaining rights; that same year, North Carolina banned collective bargaining for all public employees. Today, more than half a century later, Wisconsin's unemployment rate stands at 7.5 percent and its union membership rate is 14.2 percent. North Carolina's unemployment rate is nearly 10 percent and its

union membership rate is 3.2 percent. So much for the argument that unions drive away business and jobs.

Wisconsin is facing a state budget deficit of \$1.8 billion for the next fiscal year, about 13 percent of its total budget; North Carolina is looking at a \$2.7 billion shortfall, about 13.5 percent of the budget. So, where exactly is that, connection between public sector unions and huge state budget deficits?

To put the matter bluntly, we are in the middle of a national economic tailspin. State efforts to stomp out public employees' bargaining rights will do precious little to bring jobs back.

This new open-season on unions and collective bargaining has no connection with our current economic malaise. The political right has merely found a convenient time to flex its newfound muscle to try to get

rid of a thorn in its side for more than a century. Labor unions, whatever their flaws, have always stood for the principles of a living wage and restraint on unbridled corporate self-interest. The decline in the American labor movement is a crucial reason why our nation now has a grotesque and unsustainable maldistribution of income and wealth and a crushing burden of personal debt as millions of workers try to make ends meet on real wages that have stagnated since the 1980s.

If we really cared about saving the middle class and helping the working poor rise out of poverty, we would be rebuilding vibrant, democratic unions across the country, not bashing one of the few institutions left that speaks truth to wealth and power.

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