

Monthly Review: Ten Reasons Why Protecting Unions Is a Life and Death Issue

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by Eric Mann

In Wisconsin, tens of thousands of public sector workers were going to work every day, helping the people in the DMV, hospitals, health care centers, public transportation, teachers, fire fighters, and clerical workers. Then, on February 11, 2011 Republican Governor Scott Walker introduced a bill, with a Republican majority in the legislature, that would virtually eliminate public sector unions as we know them. The bill opposed collective bargaining rights, required annual votes to ask workers if they wanted the unions to represent them, and prevented the unions from collecting dues automatically out of workers' paychecks. The anti-union movement is spreading to Ohio and many other states and we have to develop a plan to beat back the pro-corporate anti-union forces. These Ten Reasons are put forth as a tactic to help the movement for union rights.

1) Because the relationship between labor and capital, labor and management, is in contradiction: They do not have the same class interests. Otherwise we wouldn't need unions. Unions propose radical ideas such as higher pay, safer working conditions, vacations, medical leave and benefits, and pensions. Employers, especially at this time in history, have gone to war against all of those "benefits" that many workers considered part of their total pay package -- negotiated between the unions and management, the unions and local and state governments. In one fell swoop, the Governor of Wisconsin like a petty monarch has declared that unions do not have bargaining rights -- their life and blood. All governors and anti-worker politicians are trying to copycat Scott Walker in other states. These attacks on unions and workers are living proof of why unions are so valuable.

2) Unions support the most progressive causes in the U.S.: Look at every ballot initiative statewide and nationally. Public sector unions in general have supported gay rights, women's reproductive rights, civil rights, and the rights of immigrants to live in peace, moving towards amnesty and citizenship. In many states they have challenged the mass incarceration of Black and Brown youth.

3) Unions are one of the few organized forces that can challenge the corporations in the political arena: In the 2008 presidential election the corporations outspent the unions by a ratio of 23 to 1. They are never satisfied and moved to expand their power. Under the Supreme Court's Citizens United decision, corporations can now spend unlimited money on electoral campaigns. There may come a time when it costs \$3 billion to run for president and \$10 million to run for a seat in the House of Representatives, which only one party, the Republicans, will be able to fund. Union funds for progressive initiatives and candidates are essential to our democracy and are under heavy attack. The right to use members' dues for political expenditures is both a democratic right of any union and essential; attacks on this right should be resisted. (How many votes does it take for the Koch brothers to spend their billions?)

4) Unions encourage women's leadership: The AFL-CIO has elected Arlene Holt Baker as Executive Vice President, the first Black executive officer, and Liz Schuler as Secretary Treasurer alongside new President Rich Trumka. This makes two of the top 3 officers in the federation women. Elizabeth Bunn is the first woman to be Organizing Director and Lynn Rhinehart is the first woman General Counsel. At the national level, Randi Weingarten is the president of the American Association of Teachers and Mary Kay Henry is president of the Service Employees International Union. Maria Elena Durazo is the head of the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor. The rise of women's leadership in top positions is reflected all the way down to the rank and file.

5) Unions have become a great friend of Latino immigrant labor: I remember that, as late as the 1960s, some unions were unfriendly to immigrant labor and saw immigrants as taking "American" jobs. But the union movement has made a moral and strategic about-face. Unions have become a great friend of immigrant labor, especially Latino labor, with strong representation in Justice for Janitors (SEIU), UNITE-Hotel Employees Restaurant Employees, United Food and Commercial Workers, and Laborers. In virtually every major union, organized labor has welcomed, trained, and integrated Latinos into the rank and file and leadership of the union. Today there are 2.1 million Latinos in the organized labor movement who are also highly organized as voters in swing states. The labor union is becoming an important institution for the integrity and viability of the Latino community.

6) Unions are a critical component of the Black community: The symbolism of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. being killed while supporting a sanitation workers' strike is heightened by how he offered a new strategy of a civil rights/labor alliance to address racism, poverty, and war. For almost a century, the public jobs in the North were one of the few places Black men and women could find meaningful work. Today, the right-wing bias against public sector workers and their unions is a thinly veiled attack on Black women and men doing a great job providing essential services in government agencies, from Social Security and Medicare to the public schools. During the 2008 elections, then AFL-CIO secretary treasurer and now president Richard Trumka made an impassioned speech in opposition to racism in the working class and racism directed at Barack Obama. He said that with all its imperfections the labor movement was the most racially integrated institution in the country. Trade unions, churches, and civil rights groups are three invaluable pillars holding the Black community together as it comes under fierce attack.

7) Unions are one of the few institutional bulwarks against a corporate dictatorship over all of us: How are people organized in society? Into factories and electronics assembly shops and big box stores. They wake up in the morning and, even with strong unions, much of their life is dominated by the company: what time to show up, what time breaks are and if they get one, how fast they work. Without labor unions they live in terror, knowing that at virtually any time a supervisor can come up to them and fire them for any reason and they have little or no recourse. When I went to work in the GM Van Nuys plant in 1981, "old timers" used to tell me that GM wouldn't allow them to get bathroom

breaks and they often had to hold it in for two hours while working on an assembly line. Finally, the UAW had won "relief men and women" who could come to your job and let you get out for 5 minutes and get back to the line -- a civilizing element of work won by the union. One hundred years ago, women in the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory had to work in a factory with permanently closed doors -- and 146 workers were burned or jumped to their death. Today, many workers exposed to toxic chemicals, to dangerous mining jobs, still risk their lives to go to work. Bob Herbert, formerly of the New York Times, said that the astronomical and immoral concentration of wealth is moving the US toward becoming a democracy in name only. Labor unions are among our best hopes for democracy.

8) Union meetings are rough and tumble but a real exciting place to go: Some local unions are run by a clique but the members have the right to vote them out. Some union meetings are run top down but the workers have the right to yell out their ideas and get the floor. Some local unions -- like the one I was in, UAW Local 645 in Van Nuys, California -- were hotbeds of political discussion with a great local union president who encouraged discussions of Jobs with Peace, civil rights, immigrant rights, nuclear disarmament, the war in El Salvador, and of course our local contract, conditions in the plant, uses of union money, and future elections. Local union meetings are best for the feisty but the great thing about them is that they are real grassroots democracy. If you haven't yet, you should try it. Democracy gets to be a contagious thing.

9) Unions are a force for world peace and do not want working people fighting each other when peaceful means of resolving disputes exist: In recent years, the AFL-CIO came out strongly against the war in Iraq, the first time it had ever opposed a war when U.S. troops were on the ground. The AFL-CIO also passed a resolution for the US to withdraw the troops from Afghanistan. At the One Nation March in October, 2010, many union leaders like UAW President Bob King made heart-felt pleas to bring the troops home and to invest in our declining if not dying schools, hospitals, clean industries, and social services -- all of which could generate millions of jobs. U.S. Labor Against the War has been doing some very fine organizing. They have 190 affiliates -- from entire national unions such as the Communications Workers of America to local labor councils, entire union locals, and local USLAW workers' groups. As organizer Gene Bruskin points out, the anti-war movement today has the highest number of working-class people in the leadership of any anti-war movement going back decades. Its base has a strong working class as well as student and middle-class composition.

10) Unions are social institutions in the age of alienation: Today people are so damned lonely. Large workplaces are shutting down. People are living on their parents' couch. Families are taking care of ailing relatives (with very little or no help from the government). People try to construct a life with 20 apps on their iPhone but all it does is send them from one lonely place to another. I know friends who have 1,000 "friends" on Facebook, but not one answered a call to come out to a demonstration. Unions provide companionship and camaraderie in the midst of alienation and anomie. It's damn lonely out there and unions offer softball teams, social events, and a fight for better conditions and dignity at work, and provide a sense of community. Whether you're a union member

or not, we need millions of people wearing "Support Our Unions" T-shirts to unite the organized, unorganized, and union supporters and wearing them to rallies at statehouses and workplaces throughout the country. The fight to preserve and expand labor unions is a battle that no one can afford to sit out -- the stakes are so high for all of us.