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## Spirit of Madison at Oregon rallies

The spirit of Madison came alive in Oregon at a pair of rallies Feb. 25 and 26 in Portland and Salem.

The actions were called to show solidarity with Midwest public workers who are under attack from governors determined to bust their unions, particularly in Wisconsin.

The Portland event, organized by Portland Jobs with Justice and the Oregon AFL-CIO, drew as many as 800 to a rally in Director Park and a subsequent march that snaked through downtown Portland.

Walker and other governors have energized, mobilized, and organized members across this country like never before, said National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel, in town for a regional conference of affiliated teachers unions.

“Let’s not dance around what’s going on,” said Oregon AFL-CIO President Tom Chamberlain. “Let’s not tiptoe. Let’s call it like it is. This is class warfare.”

“We’ve been here before,” Chamberlain said. “Your grandparents and great-grandparents stood in these

streets 75 years ago and fought for our right to create a union, fought, bled, and died to create the middle class. We remember their courage. We remember they made a better life for us. If we stand our ground, 75 years from now, our descendants will be standing in the same place, thanking us for what we did in turning back the tide.”

“This fight is not about state budgets,” said Oregon AFSCME Executive Director Ken Allen. “Wisconsin AFSCME already agreed to the pension and health care concessions that that despicable governor demanded. We agreed to those concessions and he still wants to eliminate collective bargaining.”

Portland teacher Adam Sanchez reported on several days he spent with the protesters in Wisconsin. Sanchez slept in the state capitol building alongside hundreds of high school, college and grad students, workers union and non-union, private and public sector from all across the state and other states who had come to join them in solidarity. He described a high degree of self-organization, with

organized distribution of donated food, a sign-making station, info center, a lost and found, free earplugs, mittens, and hand warmers, organized cleaning crews.

The following day, an estimated 1,000 people turned up outside the state capitol building in Salem for a rally set up by MoveOn.org with help from many other groups. The crowd was mostly nonunion, but citizen after citizen expressed what diehard unionists have been longing to hear: gratitude for past victories, and an understanding that union workers set standards for all.

“We’re not union members, but we know how important unions are to our wage scale,” said one business owner.

Oregon State Rep Brad Witt (D-Clatskanie), a union rep at United Food and Commercial Workers Local 555, said he sees this struggle leading to a rebirth of the American labor movement. “You’ve woken up the sleeping giant,” Witt said. “There is no division. There is no public sector and private sector. This is trade unionism: You take one of us on, you take all of us on.”



Oregon State Rep. Michael Dembrow (D-Portland) holds a “We are One” sign as Mary Winzig, sporting a Green Bay Packers foam cheesehead, listens to National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel address a rally in Portland Feb. 25 in support of workers in Wisconsin who are fighting to keep their collective bargaining rights.

## We are all Wisconsin: Nationwide fightback on the rise

By **DON McINTOSH**  
Associate Editor

A new crop of Republican governors has declared war on unions, provoking the biggest showdown for the American labor movement since President Ronald Reagan fired striking air traffic controllers in 1981. Madison, Wisconsin, has become the center of the fightback.

State budget shortfalls are the context, but not the explanation, of the conflict. It’s now three years into the worst recession since the Great Depression, and direct federal aid to the states under the stimulus program has ended. Facing state budget shortfalls, governors across the country — including Democrats — are seeking to shrink public employee wages and benefits. But a handful of governors in the Midwest want to go much further, and have introduced legislation directly targeting unions.

Governors in Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, Tennessee, and Wisconsin, are pushing bills that would curb or eliminate public employees’ right to collective bargaining. Indiana Republicans are also pushing to gut private sector unions with bills to repeal the state prevailing wage law and make Indiana a “right to work” state. In Missouri, there’s even a proposal to overturn

protections against child labor.

But it was Wisconsin Republican Gov. Scott Walker who fired the shot heard around the world. At a private Feb. 7 dinner meeting of his newly-convened cabinet, Walker held up a photograph of Ronald Reagan and announced that his forthcoming proposals on collective bargaining would be “our time to change the course of history.”

On Friday, Feb. 11, Walker unveiled what he called his “budget repair” plan, a 144-page bill that would strip collective bargaining rights from 175,000 public sector workers in Wisconsin. His bill would:

- eliminate all collective bargaining rights for home health care workers and University of Wisconsin faculty and academic staff, and for employees of University of Wisconsin hospitals and clinics;
- require public-employee unions to negotiate new contracts every year, but bar them from negotiating anything but base wages — not benefits, not work rules, nothing but wages;
- restrict even those wage negotiations — for state employees and teachers — by limiting raises to the consumer price index unless voters approve higher raises via a referendum;

- require government workers to pay half the cost of their pensions — in effect, a 5.8 percent salary cut — and to pay at least 12.6 percent of their health care premiums;
- allow state officials to fire workers for striking, or for missing work for three unexcused days;
- give public-sector workers in union-represented workplaces the right to pay no dues (currently, workers can choose not to join, but must make “fair share” payments to cover the costs of representation);
- halt state collection of union dues; and
- require unionized public-sector units to vote every year to determine whether a majority of workers still want to be unionized. [The reverse would not be true: Nonunion units would not vote annually whether to unionize.]

Local police, firefighters and state troopers would be exempt from the bargaining changes, but the changes would apply to state capitol police, university police officers, and prison guards.

Wisconsin state workers had already been without a formal contract since July 2009,

though the previous union contract remained in force under extensions. The same day he introduced the bill, Walker gave the legally required formal notice that those extensions would end effective March 13, meaning state workers will no longer have a union contract after that.

Even before protests began, Walker expected a reaction. At the press conference announcing the bill, Walker made repeated open-ended threats to call out the National Guard in the event of public worker unrest. He said he was the “commander and chief” of the state and that the National Guard would “respond to whatever the governor may call for,” that it “would fully prepared to handle whatever may occur,” and that he thought it prudent to “plan for the worst.”

Walker urged the Republican-controlled Wisconsin Legislature to pass the bill by Feb. 25.

The Legislature scheduled hearings for the following Tuesday.

The reaction was explosive. Within days, teacher sick-outs had shut school districts across Wisconsin; state Senate Democrats had fled to Illinois to halt action on the bill; and tens of thousands of union supporters were maintain-

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