

A workers must stand together

By **JEFF JOHNSON**

Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin is attempting to accomplish what has been a long-term right-wing strategy to break public employee unions. Folks like the billionaire Koch brothers, Karl Rove and others who funded Scott Walker and the Tea Party candidates in 2010 know that if public employee unions can be broken then the labor movement can be broken as well.

What is at stake here is the fundamental values of who we are as a people, our democratic rights, and who gets to set the terms of dialogue. This is an attack on the middle class and the American dream. But if the voices of union workers can be stifled, it is also an attack on the poor, the vulnerable and immigrants as well.

Workers and public servants in particular did not create the deficits that many of our states are facing today. In fact, on average public employees earn about 10 to 12 percent lower wages than their private sector counterparts, and they receive modest pensions. In Washington State, public employees have accepted a 3 percent wage cut over the next two years as well as a 25 percent increase in their health care premium and co-pay shares.

For decades in our country there was

an implicit "social contract" that was based on shared prosperity — with rising productivity, there would be a rising standard of living. Workers would be able to afford homes and put their kids through college — health care, sick leave, vacation and pensions were part of the package as well.

The "social contract" is over, even though productivity and profits continue to rise for banks and corporations.

The "Great Recession" was created by Wall Street banks and insurance companies. They turned our economy into a giant casino, where they bet our manufacturing base, our infrastructure, education and health care funding against the house. They won; we lost.

Unemployment is at 9.2 percent in Washington state, unless you are a person of color, and then it ranges from 25 to 75 percent, or unless you work in the building and construction trades, where the unemployment rate ranges from 30 to 60 percent. We have the highest poverty rate in Washington state since the 1950s; foreclosures are going through the roof; and as a nation we have the most unequal distribution of income and wealth since the Gilded Age of the late 19th century.

This is the backdrop they created for trying to set private sector workers

against public sector workers, and non-immigrant workers against immigrant workers. These divide-and-conquer tactics are as old as capitalism. As workers, we need to be smarter and stand in solidarity.

The policies that led to the recession and the acceleration of wealth to the top include:

- Deregulating the financial industry
- Creating a tax code filled with exemptions for the wealthy
- Rewarding companies that offshored jobs
- Creating trade policies that reward multinational corporations but de-industrialized our country, turning the phrase "Made in America" into a relic of the past
- Financing two wars simultaneously

Notice, you don't see funding for affordable housing, home care services, early childhood education or public safety in the list above. But the Republican governors of Wisconsin, Ohio, et al, would have us pay the cost of deficits by cutting programs that our most vulnerable need, contracting out public employee jobs or simply removing the rights of workers to have a voice at the workplace.

They should be looking toward the wealthy and corporate America to fix the deficits that they created. The banks are sitting on over a trillion dollars of assets that they are not reinvesting in America, while corporate America raked in nearly \$1.7 trillion in profits during the third quarter of 2010. This is the most profitable corporate America

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has ever been.

We need, as labor, to stand in solidarity and say no to budget cuts that punish the vulnerable, no to foreclosures, no to union busting, no to contracting out, and no to pitting workers against each other and non-immigrants against immigrants.

We need a moral budget and revenue document that fills the deficit hole by declaring a moratorium on tax loopholes.

(Editor's Note: Jeff Johnson is president of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO.)

Consider pol's trade policy before voting

To The Editor:

This is a copy of a letter I wrote to President Obama:

"Dear Mr. President,

Regarding your weekly radio address, may I remind you that a half-truth is no better than a lie. I refer to your encouraging comments about the growth in U.S. exports, while failing to mention that they continue to be outpaced by imports.

Following the recent closure of a paper mill here in Oregon, the head of the local union representing those workers had a article in the Northwest Labor Press showing how the closure was the

result of failed U.S. trade policies. Just as the Tea Party served notice on Republicans that they will no longer be getting a vote simply because they have an "R" after their name, the days of you and your party getting labors' vote simply because you have a "D" after your name are coming to an end.

For a growing number of us, the criteria is — we will vote for NO free-traders, regardless of party! In the areas of exportation of manufacturing jobs, and failing to close the border to slow the onslaught of illegal aliens competing for the crumbs that are left, it has become painfully obvious that your ad-

ministration is no better than the Bush Administration.

Henry Ford was once asked why he paid his workers so much. He replied: "So they can afford to buy my cars." I hold this truth to be self-evident — for a nation's economy to survive and thrive long term, either Mr. Ford or the free-traders and out-sourcers can be right — NOT BOTH!

Thanks for listening."

Dean Wolf
IBEW Local 48
Tigard, Oregon

Teachers, unions blamed for factors beyond their control

To The Editor:

I am baffled and frustrated with how teachers are being held accountable and even blamed for circumstances beyond their control.

We cut funding for public education, resulting in larger class sizes, and expect the student-to-teacher ratio to have no impact on our young learners' success.

We ask teachers to reach children who come to school hungry, tired and scared because of complicated family lives or because they are sleeping in homeless shelters or cars.

We expect teachers to successfully deal with students with physical, emotional and mental challenges, the same

children who often have little or no access to health care or medication.

Then, when students do not meet educational standards, we flunk the teacher rather than looking at the myriad of other ways that our society has failed these children.

I am not a teacher, but I have many friends and family members who are, and I know that they do the best they can within a very flawed system.

Our focus must shift from blaming teachers, and teachers' unions, to looking at how to meet the needs of the children and families who are most at risk.

Debra Kidney
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