

The New York Times, Scott Walker and the unions

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Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker is expected to announce his candidacy for US president in the next few weeks, joining the growing list of right-wing Republicans seeking their party's nomination for the 2016 race.

For a significant section of the corporate and political establishment, Walker proved his presidential bona fides by defeating the mass protest movement against his austerity measures and attacks on Wisconsin public sector workers in 2011. The effort to inflate the significance of this political nobody is connected to the promotion of the myth that he faced down a ferocious struggle by the unions.

The cover story of Sunday's *New York Times Magazine*, entitled "Labor's Last Stand: Scott Walker and the Dismantling of America's Unions," exemplifies such efforts. Written by Dan Kaufman, who is also a contributor to the *Nation* magazine, the article belongs to a genre of pieces by liberal and "left" writers aimed at rehabilitating the image of the unions, whose credibility has been shattered by decades of betrayals and complicity in the impoverishment of the working class.

These efforts have only intensified since the passage of "right-to-work" laws in former union strongholds such as Michigan and Wisconsin, which could lead to a mass exodus of workers and the collapse of these right-wing, pro-company organizations.

Kaufman equates the token protests organized earlier this year by the unions, which failed to prevent the passage of right-to-work legislation in Wisconsin, with the mass protests that erupted largely outside of the control of the unions in February 2011. This year's demonstration, he claims, was "reminiscent of a similar one that played out four years earlier, in 2011, when thousands of people occupied the Capitol's rotunda for

more than two weeks to protest Act 10, a law that demolished collective-bargaining rights for nearly all public employees."

Kaufman portrays the existing unions as the embodiment and defenders of the social gains won through more than a century of working class struggle. He links them to the long struggle by workers to win the right to organize and collectively bargain, citing the murder of seven marchers, including a 13-year-old boy, by Wisconsin National Guard troops that fired on protesters demanding an eight-hour day on May 5, 1886.

Yet even before the 2011 protests erupted, officials from the AFSCME-affiliated Wisconsin State Employees Union as well as the Wisconsin Education Association Council announced their willingness to accept Walker's demands for \$330 million in health care and pension concessions, so long as Walker did not attack their financial and institutional interests, including the automatic dues check-off that directly funneled money from workers' paychecks into the unions' coffers.

From the outset, the unions sought to defend the interests of the bureaucrats at the top. They were more than willing to bargain away the rights and conditions of their members to do so.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote at the time: "By declaring their willingness to accept every concession beforehand, they have given up collective bargaining, if this term is to have any substantive meaning at all—that is, the right of the workers to fight against the demands of the corporations and the state. The unions have already bargained away everything, leaving the working class to collectively suffer."

The mass protest movement in February 2011 was not initiated by the unions, which responded to

Walker's demands by calling for a toothless "lobby day" at the state Capitol. To their surprise and consternation, however, the outrage over Walker's demands took the form of students walking out of high schools, teachers carrying out an unauthorized "sick out," and thousands of protesters, inspired by the contemporaneous events unfolding in Egypt, occupying the Capitol building in Madison.

In the ensuing weeks, the unions worked single-mindedly to contain and isolate this movement and ultimately strangle it by subordinating it to the Democratic Party, which had imposed concessions on public workers while it occupied the State House and controlled the legislature, and had already declared its support for the new cuts demanded by Walker. In this betrayal, the unions enjoyed the full support of the *Nation* magazine and pseudo-left groups such as the International Socialist Organization.

The overriding concern of all of these forces was the potential for the mass protests to trigger a broader movement of the working class throughout the US that would rapidly expose the anti-working class policies of the Democrats and President Obama and fuel the emergence of an independent political movement against both big business parties.

After Republican legislators pushed through Walker's bill on March 9, 2011, the call for a general strike—advanced by the Socialist Equality Party and the WSWS—won widespread support, with hundreds of protesters in the Capitol rotunda chanting the demand, to the horror of union officials and Democratic politicians.

The unions quickly called off the protests and launched a petition drive to recall Walker and elect a Democrat. They backed the campaign of a right-wing Democrat who ran on a platform of "fiscal responsibility," i.e., austerity, and, of course, lost.

In an effort to conceal these facts, Kaufman cites the self-serving comments of Randy Bryce, the "political coordinator" of Ironworkers Local 8 in Milwaukee, who claims Walker prevailed because private-sector workers did not come to the aid of their public-sector brethren in 2011. In fact, thousands of manufacturing, construction and other private-sector workers joined the protests.

Bryce is introduced by Kaufman to shift the blame for the defeat onto the workers and cover up the

treachery of the union officials.

Kaufman approvingly cites the comments of Bill Kennedy, the president of Rock Road Companies, an asphalt paving operation in Janesville, Wisconsin, who declares: "There's a misguided myth that unions and management don't get along. It's a business bottom-line issue. Right-to-work is going to compromise my quality, my competitiveness. The unions are my partner. They're almost like a screening agency."

This quite accurate characterization of the unions completely contradicts the author's attempt to portray them as instruments of working class struggle. No matter. In its effort to bolster these agencies of capital and the state, the *Times* feels obliged at one and the same time to con workers into believing the unions are, despite everything, "for the workers," while reminding the bosses of their yeoman's service in slashing wages and increasing profits.



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