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A Watershed Moment for Public-Sector Unions

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

In the half century since Wisconsin became the first state to give its public workers the right to bargain collectively, government employee unions have mushroomed in size and power — so much so that they now account for more than half of the nation’s union members.

But the legislative push by Wisconsin’s new governor, Scott Walker, a Republican, to slash the collective bargaining rights of his state’s public employees could prove a watershed for public-sector unions, perhaps signaling the beginning of a decline in their power — both at the bargaining table and in politics.

Three-fourths of the states allow collective bargaining by some or all of state or local government employees. And labor’s friends and foes alike agree that if the Wisconsin legislation passes, it will create momentum for similar bills in Ohio, Indiana and other states.

“These kinds of high-profile public-employee battles have enormous stakes,” said Benjamin Sachs, a professor of labor law at Harvard. “We’re still feeling the consequences of [President Reagan](#) confronting the union in the air controllers’ strike. For anyone interested in union rights, the fight in Wisconsin couldn’t be more important.”

From Florida to California, many political leaders are seeking to cut the wages and benefits of public-sector workers to help balance strained budgets.

But Mr. Walker is going far beyond that, seeking to definitively curb the power of government unions in his state. He sees public-employee unions as a bane to the taxpayer because they demand — and often win — generous health and pension plans that help push up taxes and drive budget deficits higher.

To end that cycle, he wants to restrict the unions to bargaining over just one topic, base wages, while eliminating their ability to deal over health care, working hours and vacations. Moreover, he wants to require unions to win an employee election every year to continue representing workers.

By flooding the State Capitol in Madison with more than 10,000 protesters, labor unions are doing their utmost to block Mr. Walker's plans. They helped persuade Democratic state senators to slip out of the building this week to deny Republicans the quorum they needed to pass the legislation.

Democrats say the governor's "budget repair bill" — strongly supported by the Republicans who control both legislative houses — is political payback, intended to cripple public-sector unions, which spent more than \$200 million to back Democrats across the country in November's elections.

Mr. Walker denies any such notion, saying he simply wants to curb union bargaining rights and bring public workers' wages and benefits in line with the private sector. "It's not about the unions," he said this week. "It's about balancing the budget."

Christopher Policano, a spokesman for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, said his union was willing to negotiate concessions with Mr. Walker, "but he wants to throw out the bargaining table."

Mr. Walker has repeatedly argued that most Wisconsin residents back his legislation. After visiting a factory this week, he said that private-sector workers often complain that public employees receive more generous health and pension benefits than they do.

There is no question that public-sector unions and the thousands of contracts they have negotiated over the years have improved wages and pensions of government workers and made government service more attractive. But union leaders are quick to point to studies showing that overall compensation for government employees is slightly lower than for private-sector employees of comparable age and education.

Also embedded in the Wisconsin debate — and reaching well beyond that state — is a more fundamental dispute over the role, even the legitimacy, of public-sector unions. Like Mr. Walker, Ohio's new governor, [John Kasich](#), and Indiana's second-term governor, [Mitch Daniels](#), both Republicans, see public-sector bargaining as something to be banned or severely restricted because of its effect on taxpayers and government budgets.

Some Republicans quote President [Franklin D. Roosevelt](#), a Democrat, who bridled at public-sector unionism and once said, "The process of collective bargaining, as usually understood, cannot be transplanted in the public service."

Republicans say the Democrats have embraced the government employees' cause because weaker unions would reduce crucial political support for Democratic candidates. Republicans have often denounced what they say is a squalid deal in which public-sector unions spend generously to elect allies to office and then those allies lavish generous wages and benefits on union members.

Ever since Wisconsin gave its government employees the right to bargain in 1959, it has generally been Democrats who have extended that right in other states. In 1962, President [John F. Kennedy](#) gave most federal employees the right to unionize and bargain collectively.

The national importance of the Wisconsin fight is clear. [President Obama](#) weighed in on labor's behalf on Wednesday, calling Mr. Walker's proposals "an assault on unions." And the House speaker, [John A. Boehner](#), Republican of Ohio, praised Mr. Walker for "confronting problems that have been neglected for years at the expense of jobs and economic growth."

Citing an anticipated budget deficit of \$137 million this year and a \$3.6 billion shortfall over the next two years, Mr. Walker argues that his measures to curb union power and bargaining are essential to help balance the budget. Union leaders say that several of Mr. Walker's proposals — including the one that would require elections each year to determine whether a majority of public employees want to keep their union — are really intended to cripple unions, not balance the budget.

Other governors, Democrat and Republican, are also grappling with budget deficits. But many of those governors, like [Jerry Brown](#) of California and [Andrew M. Cuomo](#) in New York, both Democrats, and Rick Snyder of Michigan, a Republican, are not trying to strip bargaining rights. They are instead using public pressure and the threat of layoffs to persuade public-sector unions to make far-reaching concessions.

“Wisconsin has become ground zero for the process of pushing back against unions,” said Steve Meyer, a professor of labor history at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. “People are waiting to see what happens here. That’s why the labor movement has become so deeply involved trying to stop this process.”

As happens so often in today’s increasingly partisan politics, the battle reflects how differently Republicans and Democrats view a particular subject — in this case, unions and their power. Many Republicans see public-sector unions as greedy, powerful special interests that are taking too many taxpayer dollars. Many Democrats see them as natural allies and a vital part of a labor movement that has helped build the nation’s middle class.

The furious demonstrators in Madison have shown that public-sector unions still wield real power. But if the Legislature enacts Mr. Walker’s bill, a tipping point might well be reached, with the power of public-sector unions tilting into decline.



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