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# Countering the Siege

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

WASHINGTON — Perhaps more than any other American, Gerald W. McEntee has surfed the rising tide of public sector unions to success and power. As leader of the largest union of state and local government workers for three decades, he has amassed enormous political influence and a huge campaign war chest that he has not hesitated to use to advance his union's interests.

But now, with public sector unions under attack in deficit-plagued states and cities nationwide, Mr. McEntee faces the biggest challenge of his career — avoiding a wipeout.

In Wisconsin and Ohio, newly enacted laws will cripple the bargaining rights of 200,000 members of his union and may cause many to quit, jeopardizing the union's dues base and political clout. The union, the [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees](#), known as Afscome (pronounced AFS-mee), is also under assault in Florida and New Jersey, where governors and lawmakers are seeking to curb bargaining rights or achieve far-reaching concessions on what many say are overly generous health benefits and pensions.

Still combative at age 76, Mr. McEntee has pushed away talk of retirement and plunged into battle to defend his union, which has grown from 900,000 members when he took over to 1.4 million today.

“The Republicans who were elected last November promised to focus on jobs, but instead they're

focusing on going after the unions,” Mr. McEntee said. “That’s a big overreach.”

In Wisconsin and Ohio, Republican lawmakers argued that public sector unions had grown too powerful and that it was vital to weaken public employees’ bargaining rights, so as to give state and local governments flexibility to help erase their budget deficits. In what is largely a decentralized union, Mr. McEntee is doing his utmost to serve as national field marshal, strategist and megaphone for the counterattack.

He sent money to Wisconsin to help fight Governor [Scott Walker](#)’s anti-union legislation, initially to mount the huge protests in Madison before the law was enacted and more recently to try to elect a labor-friendly [Supreme Court](#) justice and gather signatures to recall eight Republican state senators who voted for the law.

Mr. McEntee has also been pouring resources into Ohio to promote a statewide referendum to overturn that state’s new anti-bargaining law.

Last week, he joined an emerging national battle — fighting House Republicans’ plan to cut [Medicare](#) and [Medicaid](#). In addition to plotting strategy with Democrats, Apscme is helping to pay for broadcast ads attacking Republicans. The union is also urging 250,000 retirees to fight the plan by contacting lawmakers in Washington.

“He’s a very political animal,” said [Richard A. Gephardt](#), the former House Democratic leader. “He’ll be effective in fighting back.”

The son of a Philadelphia street cleaner, Mr. McEntee followed his father into the labor movement in 1958, becoming Apscme’s top official in Pennsylvania. In 1970, he played an important role in persuading that state’s Republican governor and Republican-led Senate to give state employees the right to bargain collectively.

In 1981, in an upset victory, he defeated Apscme’s secretary-treasurer to become the union’s president. In 1995, frustrated with uninspired leadership at the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#), he engineered a coup that pushed

out its longtime president, Lane Kirkland, and installed John Sweeney.

Mr. McEntee relishes his active role in national and state politics. He heads the A.F.L.-C.I.O.'s political committee, which has made him somewhat of a kingmaker in deciding political endorsements, and was an early backer of [Bill Clinton](#) for president.

After the Republican revolution of 1994, Mr. McEntee led a labor-financed advertising campaign to help derail [Newt Gingrich](#)'s proposal to rein in Medicare spending. And when Mr. Gingrich, then the House speaker, precipitated a government shutdown, Mr. McEntee's union again ran ads hitting the Republicans, helping turn public opinion against Mr. Gingrich and in favor of President Clinton.

"Gerry's effort was very helpful," said [Harold M. Ickes](#), who served as Mr. Clinton's deputy chief of staff. "Once Gerry makes up his mind on something, he's very forceful and dogged."

In 1996, Mr. McEntee joined Mr. Sweeney to persuade the A.F.L.-C.I.O. to spend \$36 million, then a huge sum, to help re-elect President Clinton and Democratic House members. As the federation's political chairman, he helped overhaul labor's campaign operations to emphasize workplace fliers, door-knocking and get-out-the-vote efforts.

"He was the main mover and shaker in rebuilding labor's political clout," said Steve Rosenthal, a former A.F.L.-C.I.O. political director, who added, "He's a big personality and he rolls the dice in a very big way."

Mr. McEntee's critics say he can be brash, pushy and all too happy to pound political opponents in speeches and ads.

Mark Neumann, who was a Republican congressman from Wisconsin in the mid-1990s, still complains about the "horrible" ads Mr. McEntee ran against Mr. Gingrich's allies. One showed a middle-aged couple at their kitchen table, with the wife worrying that she might have to quit her job to take care of her mother if Mr. Gingrich's proposals were enacted. "Gingrich and his Republicans are starting to ram

their Medicare and Medicaid cuts through Congress now,” that ad said. “so they can pay for more tax giveaways to the rich.”

“They were misleading,” Mr. Neumann said. He said Republicans were not planning cuts, but were merely trying to hold down Medicare spending increases to 7 percent a year from a projected 14 percent.

More recently, some of Mr. McEntee’s political bets have gone more wrong than right.

During the 2008 primaries, he aggressively backed [Hillary Rodham Clinton](#) over [Barack Obama](#), at one point saying Mr. Obama “has a problem with the blue-collar work and relating to that worker.”

Last fall, he claimed that his union had spent \$90 million in the 2010 campaign, making Afscome the biggest underwriter of the Democrats’ efforts. Mr. McEntee now regrets his boastful words, acknowledging that they helped make public employee unions a target when Republicans swept to victory in many states.

“Some of this is political payback,” he said. “The Republicans are thinking, ‘The public sector unions are a major political force, and if we weaken them, that’ll leave us with an awfully weakened Democratic Party.’”

Given recent events, public sector unions may well end up smaller and weaker.

In Wisconsin, where Afscome was founded in 1932, Governor Walker’s legislation, which has been suspended pending a legal challenge, would all but end collective bargaining. It would bar state and local governments from collecting workers’ union dues for public employee unions and would require employees to vote every year on whether they want to keep their union.

“I don’t see how unions can survive in this situation,” said William Powell Jones, a [University of Wisconsin](#) labor historian. “This bill is designed to make it almost impossible to operate a union.”

Unlikely as it may sound, Mr. McEntee asserts that his union is on the offensive, not the defensive. He

points to opinion polls showing that the public backs unions, not the Republican governors, in their recent clashes. He says many union members are feeling so angry toward the Republicans and so enthusiastic about their union that they will want to continue paying union dues — unlike in Indiana, where 90 percent of state employees stopped paying dues after Governor [Mitch Daniels](#) ended bargaining for them in 2005.

“We haven’t had this kind of energy, this kind of spark, in our union in decades,” Mr. McEntee said.

“Look at the crowds that came out to protest in Wisconsin: 50,000, 70,000, 100,000. These people are jazzed up. They’re ready to do battle.”



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