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The Post-Wisconsin Game Plan

John Nichols | May 11, 2011

Mary Kay Henry had just spent a day talking with many of the thousands of Wisconsinites who had packed the State Capitol in Madison for the February protests against Republican Governor Scott Walker's proposals to scrap collective bargaining rights and slash funding for public education and services. Now, as she waited in a legislative hearing room that had been turned into a makeshift studio for a Pennsylvania labor radio show, the new president of the 2.2 million-member Service Employees International Union was marveling at what she had seen. "It's inspiring, so inspiring, but we have to pay attention to what's happening here," she said, in a calm, thoughtful voice. "We've got to take this national, and we've got to keep the spirit, the energy. We've got to do it right."

Henry was not just speaking in the excitement of the moment. Even before the Wisconsin uprising and ensuing demonstrations in Ohio, Indiana, Michigan and Maine, SEIU had been drawing the outlines of a Fight for a Fair Economy campaign that would use the resources of the union to mobilize low-wage workers—be they union members or not—into a movement aimed at transforming a national debate that has been defined by conservative talking points and ginned-up Tea Party "populism." After the frustrating experience of trying to get the Employee Free Choice Act through a supposedly friendly Congress in the first two years of President Obama's administration, Henry and a growing number of labor leaders are coming to recognize that simply electing Democrats is not enough. A memo that circulated in January among members of the union's executive board declared, "We can't spark an organizing surge without changing the environment, so that workers see unions not as self-interested institutions but as vehicles through which they can collectively stand up for a more fair economy."

Post-Wisconsin, there is a tentative but emerging consensus that mass movements at the state level might matter just as much to the broader goals of labor and the left as traditional election-oriented campaigning. As Steve Cobble, former political director of the Rev. Jesse Jackson's Rainbow Coalition campaigns of the 1980s, argues, "The energy that's developed in Wisconsin and Ohio, and that could develop in a lot of other states, is what's needed to renew the coalitions that can re-elect Obama in 2012 and elect a lot of Democrats. But it should go further than that. With the right organizing push, unions can build a base that forces Obama and the Democrats to take more progressive stands and to govern accordingly."

The size of the demonstrations in the states, and the agility with which protest movements have pivoted to political fights that could shift control of governorships and legislatures, has prompted this reassessment of strategy by labor and its allies. Rather than a single-minded focus on electing Democrats—or the rare friendly Republican—the idea is that more might be accomplished by