

Then They Came for the Trade Unionists

William Rivers Pitt | Thursday 10 March 2011

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On this day, it behooves us to remember the words of Martin Niemoller.

"First they came for the communists," he wrote, "and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a communist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't speak out because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for me and there was no one left to speak out for me."

I am a trade unionist, and yesterday in Wisconsin, they came for me. They came for you. They came for every working person in America, and their intent could not be more clear. Governor Scott Walker, along with the Koch Brothers and the right-wing radicals of the Republican Party, moved in darkness and with shameless deceit to gut the ability of dedicated laborers to bargain on an equal footing for the right to earn a living wage and to have access to decent health care.

Among other things, the bill as passed allows the state to fire anyone who participates in a strike. The story of the 20th century was written by workers who dared to face the truncheon in order to fight for their basic rights, and the strike was integral to that struggle. Any Wisconsin worker who dares to stand in defiance of The Bosses now faces personal annihilation, not just for themselves, but for their family. America was made in the struggle of union workers standing shoulder to shoulder in defiance of the idea that being rich means being right. That struggle is now in mortal peril, and the outcome affects all of us.

Fairness and the rule of law had no place in Wednesday's filthy action. This move was done in secret, without notice or announcement as required by Wisconsin law, and bears the stamp of the cowards and cretins who are responsible. Similar anti-worker legislation has been unfolding in Ohio, Indiana, Florida and more than a dozen other states. Those responsible claim such actions are necessary because of economic concerns, but the Wisconsin perpetrators tipped their hand. They stripped the bill in question of anything having to do with the state budget, so as to give them the chance to vote without a quorum...but the entire premise of their anti-union attack was that the destruction of collective bargaining was needed to salvage the state's financial situation. By gutting the bill of any semblance of budgetary issues, all they were left with is what they were after in the first place: the end of collective bargaining, the end of unions altogether, and by proxy, the end of the Democratic Party.

Eric Kleefeld, the excellent reporter for TalkingPointsMemo, and a Wisconsin native, exposed the endgame thusly:

The Democratic Party in Wisconsin is, to an extent that is not true in most other states, a genuine labor party -- a party that is intertwined with unions at the institutional level, with many politicians who have also been union officials or done legal work with unions, and which speaks for organized labor in key debates. They in turn compete with the Republican Party, which represents business interests as embodied by the state's Chamber group, Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce, in what has until now been a sometimes uneasy but nevertheless predictable political system.

In short, unions in Wisconsin are not just economic organizations made up of their respective workers - they are political institutions that are a major part of the state. As such, a change to the state's union laws that would threaten the existence of organized labor would in turn threaten the existence of the Democratic Party itself in Wisconsin, as people have known it for over half a century -- something that state Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald (R) may have accidentally alluded to earlier today.

On top of that, the class consciousness was especially ignited by Walker's phone call two weeks ago with blogger Ian Murphy, who was posing as Republican financier David Koch. During that call, Walker discussed his ideas for tricking the Democrats into coming back by pretending to negotiate, his ambition to bust the public employee unions in the mold of President Reagan firing the air traffic controllers, and that he had considered (but ruled out) planting troublemakers in the crowds of protesters. But beyond the specifics, the optics alone were amazing: The state's governor was seen buddying up to someone he believed to be a mega-rich donor from out of state.

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Say what you will about the Democratic Party. For my part, I can say plenty, especially about President Obama's

total absence during the three weeks this struggle has been going on, and about the White House's angry insistence that the fight in Wisconsin is merely "a distraction."

All Party nonsense aside, this is about a governor attacking people who work for a living, because they have the gall to believe standing together to fight for simple things like fair wages and basic health care is more important than a failing governor's ego or political aspirations.

The fact of the matter is that Governor Walker has unleashed a frontal assault on working people in his state because wealthy corporatists believe "Because I Say So" is enough. Make no mistake, friends. This is class warfare. It is brazen, unmistakable, and now out in the open. They have so much, but they want more. It has been made all too clear that they will gut your life, your rights, your everything, in order to get what they want, and what they want is absolute and total control.

Mr. Niemoller wrote his poem decades ago. It might read like this today:

First they declared corporations were "people," and I didn't complain because I'm already a person.

Then they made unlimited money "speech," and I didn't complain because the American Dream says I'll be rich someday, too.

Then they commandeered the means of production by shipping our greatest strength - manufacturing - overseas, because they don't have bothersome unions over there, and I didn't complain because WalMart has cheap stuff.

Then they bought Congress so they could write the laws, and I didn't complain because I can't be bothered to vote.

Then they bought the Supreme Court so they could cement their rule, and I didn't complain because I don't have time to pay attention.

Then they bought the news so they could convince everyone it's always been this way, and I didn't complain because it's always been this way.

Then they manhandled an election and I didn't complain because I'm not from Florida.

Then they lied us into wars and I didn't complain because I'm not a soldier, or an Iraqi, or an Afghani.

Then millions died for profit and I didn't complain because the graphics on the news were totally awesome.

Then they started locking people up because they said they could and I didn't complain because nobody locked me up.

Then they started spying on everyone because they said they could and I didn't complain because I'm a real American.

Then they came for the worker, but thanks to supply-side trickle-down economics, I don't have a job.

This truth is self-evident.

They are coming for you, and they are relentless.

Stand up.

For your country, for your family, for yourself.

Stand up.

Be heard.

Strike!

Go.

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