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Union Leader Mincses No Words When Labor Issues Are at Stake

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

MADISON, Wis. — As executive director of the main union of Wisconsin state employees, Marty Beil is at the vortex of the hurricane here — and that makes some union members gulp.

A bear of a man, Mr. Beil has been known to use razor-clawed insults to maul government officials who anger him. When a former Democratic state senator took a job in the administration of Wisconsin's new Republican governor, Scott Walker, Mr. Beil said he was engaging in "the world's oldest profession" — prostitution.

And when the State Senate president, a Democrat whom unions had often endorsed, provided a pivotal vote in December to torpedo a contract Mr. Beil had negotiated with the departing Democratic governor, Mr. Beil called the man "a whore."

Now, as Mr. Walker pushes a budget bill that would force most public employees to pay more toward health care and retirement benefits and largely eliminate their collective bargaining rights, many eyes are on Mr. Beil (pronounced beel) to see whether his combative style can win over a skeptical public and achieve results with a governor who is hardly a shrinking violet himself.

Despite — or perhaps because of — his abrasive language, Mr. Beil, executive director of the Wisconsin

State Employees Union, can certainly be effective in stirring labor's troops. His behind-the-scenes work and organizing skills have helped transform Madison into a national battleground over labor rights as tens of thousands of union members and supporters have demonstrated at the Capitol. These protests, which many other unions have helped organize, have come to resemble a labor version of Woodstock.

"It's absolutely clear that the governor's budget bill is all about taking away our right to bargain collectively and organize into unions," said Mr. Beil, 64, who first took a job with the state of Wisconsin in 1969, as a probation officer. "It's difficult for us to understand how stripping people of their collective bargaining rights will help close a hole in this fiscal year's budget."

His battle with Mr. Walker is the toughest fight of Mr. Beil's career. Already, the union has agreed to Mr. Walker's demands to have public employees pay more toward their pensions and health coverage, translating into a 7 percent cut in pay.

Those concessions drew a moment of gloating from Mr. Walker at a Monday news conference. "That's an interesting development, because a week ago they said that's not acceptable," he said.

Mr. Walker says passing his "budget repair" bill will give the state, cities and school districts the flexibility they need to cut costs while minimizing layoffs, not just this year, but in future ones, too.

"It sets the table to make sure we can balance the \$3.6 billion budget we face," he said Monday. "On top of that, we need to make sure that we are giving local governments the tools they need to balance their budgets."

Mr. Walker has made no secret that he believes Mr. Beil and his parent union, the [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees](#), which has 68,000 members in Wisconsin, are obstacles to necessary change.

Back in December, before taking office, Mr. Walker lobbied hard to persuade the Legislature to vote down a tentative contract that Mr. Beil had negotiated, saying it did not save enough money despite its

two-year wage freeze.

Mr. Beil hung tough at the time, likening Mr. Walker to “the plantation owner talking to the slaves.”

Speaking of Mr. Beil’s stance then, William Powell Jones, a labor historian at the [University of Wisconsin](#), said: “My sense is his position was, ‘We’re in a position of power. We don’t negotiate.’ It’s certainly not the kind of thing to make an anti-union public sympathetic to the union movement.”

With the nation watching, Mr. Beil reversed course last week and accepted Mr. Walker’s demand that public employees pay 5.8 percent of their salaries toward their pensions and double their contributions toward health coverage. Union leaders said that since they had now met the governor halfway, he should compromise by dropping his plan to curb bargaining rights.

But Mr. Walker has held firm. For his part, Mr. Beil said his union would never agree to the bargaining limits.

“It’s all about taking our rights away,” he said. “Whether you’re a teacher, a state employee, a municipal employee, under his bill, your rights are gone to sit down as an equal at the bargaining table to work out issues like work schedules or how to transfer to another job or where do you work. All that would be gone.”

A key Walker ally in the Legislature, Speaker Jeff Fitzgerald, a Republican, called Mr. Beil “very combative” and added: I think Marty has unfortunately been out of touch for a while. He has probably led his members in the wrong direction.”

Last month, Mr. Beil called Mr. Fitzgerald and his brother, Scott, the new Senate president, “lightweights” as well as “crybabies and whiners.”

Such comments anger not just legislators, but also members of the public. A recent letter to The Wisconsin State Journal, a Madison daily, began, “Memo to Marty Beil: Take a vacation — a long one — and quit your never-ending sniping at Gov. Scott Walker and anyone else who disagrees with you.”

Mr. Beil acknowledged, “I can be a lightning rod.” He said he upset many rank-and-file workers in the 1990s when he twice endorsed [Tommy Thompson](#), a Republican, for re-election as governor.

“I will support Republicans or Democrats, whoever is good for us,” he said.

Mr. Beil says he just tells it like it is. His role is to fight for labor, he said, and he seems stunned that much of the public has turned so suddenly against public-employee unions.

“The average working person is under a lot of pressure from the economic downturn,” he said. “There’s a lot of anger out there, a lot of fear, and that was played by the right wing against us.”

“We’re as much a victim as anybody else,” he continued. “Public employees did not create the recession and the deficit here in Wisconsin. It was Wall Street.”

Ever since Mr. Walker announced his plan to curb bargaining rights, Mr. Beil has worked closely with other Wisconsin labor leaders. Every day, he confers with Phil Neuenfeldt, president of the Wisconsin State [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#), and Mary Bell, president of the Wisconsin Education Association Council, which represents 98,000 school employees, to strategize on how best to mobilize support, often by using phone banks, e-mail blasts and [Facebook](#).

“Marty is very passionate and cares deeply about what happens to his members,” Mr. Neuenfeldt said.

Asked whether Mr. Beil sometimes goes too far, unnecessarily alienating people, Mr. Neuenfeldt answered, “As I said, he’s very passionate.”



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