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Unions Rally, Linking Their Cause to Dr. King

By STEVEN GREENHOUSE

Labor unions and civil rights groups held hundreds of rallies and teach-ins on Monday to defend collective bargaining and to tie it to the cause the Rev. Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.](#) was fighting for in the days before his death exactly 43 years ago.

The sponsors of the “We Are One” rallies, held in all 50 states, repeatedly noted that when Dr. King was assassinated in Memphis on April 4, 1968, he was planning to march with 1,300 striking sanitation workers.

The rallies and 175 teach-ins were organized largely to protest the Republican-led efforts in Wisconsin and Ohio to curb bargaining for public employees. The rallies sought to build on the union protests in those states and to warn labor’s adversaries in state capitals and Washington that unions remain an important force. The rallies’ sponsors also said they wanted to protest federal and state budget cuts that they said were hurting the most vulnerable Americans.

“What we are witnessing is nothing but an ideological assault on Dr. King’s vision for a more economically just nation,” said Wade Henderson, president of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights.

Larry Cohen, president of the [Communications Workers of America](#), said several million workers were

going to stop business as usual at work or after work to join vigils, community rallies or marches at statehouses.

“We’re putting all employers and all elected officials on notice that we’re mobilizing as we haven’t in decades,” Mr. Cohen said.

Wisconsin and Ohio have enacted legislation to severely limit collective bargaining for public-sector workers, saying that was needed to help balance their budgets and rein in what they said were overly generous benefits. [Richard Trumka](#), the [A.F.L.-C.I.O.](#)’s president, said, “The immense activity this week is a direct result of the backlash provoked by overreaching governors and legislators.”

On Monday, several thousand labor supporters rallied in the rain in Memphis, many carrying “I Am a Man” placards like those the sanitation strikers carried in 1968. In Madison, Wis., a “Memphis to Madison Rally” ended with a candlelight vigil.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: April 4, 2011

An earlier version of this article misspelled the name of the president of the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights. He is Wade Henderson, not Wayne.



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