



Labor and Occupy: Insights from Wisconsin

Presentation to the workshop on “The Great Wisconsin Resistance”

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This report was first distributed through the website of Community Media Workshop (CMW) <http://www.newstips.org/labor-and-occupy-insights-from-wisconsin/>. This is an excellent website which I urge everyone to check out.

You have heard from the two previous presenters who have given us a good sense of the great surge of mass resistance in Wisconsin in February and March of 2011. This resistance rose up against the savage attack by Governor Walker and the Republican controlled state legislature on public services and on public sector workers. In particular this assault, across many states, attempted to liquidate public sector unions who remain the main line of defense of what survives of publicly supported social services, services that are essential for the US working class.

I think we all understand, or should understand, that this attack on publicly supported social services is a continuing and central part of a broad austerity campaign which has been successfully waged across the advanced capitalist world over the previous decades. This campaign, whose purpose is to preserve the wealth and profits of the ruling elites by transferring resources from the

bottom 99% to the top 1%, has intensified since the financial/economic collapse of 2007-2008. It shows no sign of slackening. In turn the austerity campaign is itself part of a broader international campaign, the rise of a new post cold war imperialism and militarism intended to consolidate control of the worlds natural resources, and to open up profitable investment opportunities. This is where NATO comes in and exhibits the key link between what has happened in Madison and what is happening in Afghanistan.

This conference, the counter summit, is focusing on specific campaigns and tactics of resistance, which is what progressive political activists, including myself usually focus on. I am going to do something different in this talk. Instead of trying to draw from our successes and failures in the great Wisconsin resistance lessons on tactics and organization I will present some thoughts on the complexity and ambiguities of that struggle. I think it is important to think a bit more clearly, to understand a bit more before we can act effectively. This goes against the grain of our activist impulses.

What I want to concentrate on is the role of contemporary trade unions in a revival of a mass political left versus their role as the center of a revived social movement. The Wisconsin resistance raised these questions in a very sharp, concrete form. The question I want to raise is whether out of the Wisconsin resistance, and related upsurges, the referendum movement in Ohio which overturned a legislative ban on public sector collective bargaining, and the still developing occupy movement will or should crystallize as primarily a mass social movement, or as a mass political movement.

In the first place, and to get this commonplace out of the way, there is what we used to call a dialectical relationship between social and political movements. Every significant social movement

has a major political impact, while political movements that are not backed by a mass social movement inevitably degenerate into opportunism, and petty political maneuvering.

This however does not mean that they are the same beasts. Social movements are aimed at righting some major unjust practices in the social system. They can arise spontaneously but to sustain themselves and obtain results they must attract a core of committed activists and organizers who base themselves and come to speak for a section of the population most oppressed by the specific practices. They achieve results by convincing a majority of the justice of the cause, but more crucially convincing the ruling class that the oppressed will no longer accept the status quo and have the capacity to seriously disrupt the social order unless their grievances are addressed. The ruling class is faced with the choice of repressing the movement by force, in the teeth of popular opposition, or yielding to the demands.

The important social movements of my lifetime were the Civil Rights movement, the Anti-war movement, and the Women's movement and they seem to fit the above pattern.

Political movements are not about correcting specific injustices, although they usually arise out of such struggles, but are about gaining power. They are not about changing certain rules or practices but about who gets to make and interpret the rules. The most successful US progressive political movements of the 20th century was the Socialist Party before WWI, and more importantly the movement around the New Deal which dominated our politics from 1932-45, the Roosevelt years. Since WW2 there has been no successful national progressive or left political movement, the most promising national efforts, which failed, being the Progressive Party of 1948 or the Jesse Jackson Rainbow coalition of 1988. There have been some significant local progressive political movements, the most interesting perhaps

being the coalition formed around Harold Washington in Chicago in the mid 1980's. On the right there was the political coalition of Wall St and religious fundamentalists organized around Ronald Reagan and most recently the Tea Party whose rhetoric at least has come to dominate the Republican Party.

Mass political movements are much messier than social movements. They lack the moral clarity of social movements. They generally involve coalitions of contradictory forces often held together by a charismatic leader. Unless they take a straight ahead revolutionary and insurrectionary form, which has never happened in the US, they involve bargaining, back room wheeling and dealing, and nasty maneuvering and compromise as well as mass mobilizations. The path to some level of progressive political power in our capitalist democracy is winding and complex and the level of power in the hands of popular forces is always limited, constrained by the necessity of maintaining an economic order based on private property.

Historically trade unions have tended to play a consistent role with respect to both social and political movements. The contemporary industrial unions, but not the craft or public sector unions, arose out of a 1920's and 1930's social movement that attacked the insecure, oppressive, and ill paid working conditions in manufacturing, mining, and transportation. However, once industrial unions became accepted the workers movement faded away, becoming absorbed in the patriotism of winning WW2. The trade unions were never a leading force in the subsequent civil rights, anti-war, or woman's movement, coming late to these movements and contributing mostly in rhetoric and resolutions, and only lightly in material or human resources, or through mass mobilizing.

The new industrial unions became the backbone of the New Deal Coalition and along with the older craft and the more recent

service unions have continued to play a political role within the Democratic Party, although their actual political power, their ability to influence policy has been declining, along with the percentage of workers in unions, for fifty years. More precisely, at present the industrial and traditional craft unions have disintegrated both in terms of membership and capacity for mobilization, and consequently have little ability to intervene in serious policy debates. The service unions in contrast retain significant membership in their sectors, particularly in public service, and more capacity for mobilization. This has given them a certain cachet within the Democratic Party. However since control of the Democratic Party, passed to the neo-liberals thirty years ago who see no future economic or social role for trade unions there is no room for labor at the basic policy making tables, and the relationship between the unions and the Democratic Party has become primarily one of opportunism. The Democratic Party uses the unions to GOTV, and the unions use the Democrats to politically protect themselves from right wing initiatives to dismantle them.

This dynamic was clearly visible in the Wisconsin resistance. The Democratic state senators sole role was to flee the state denying the Republicans a quorum for a few weeks. They had no capacity to mobilize or to provide leadership. The statewide labor leadership, which included a significant number of progressives, initial response was to seek a compromise with the Republican politicians but found themselves trapped between the explosion of resistance of the rank and file, ie the teachers staying home from work, and the occupation by primarily public sector workers of the state house and the absolute intransigence of Governor Walker. Forced to take leadership of this mass mobilization the Wisconsin public sector unions sought and found support from the national trade unions while the national Democratic Party leadership was nowhere to be seen.

Joined by progressives and leftists from Wisconsin and surrounding states, and lacking substantial organized political forces the Wisconsin resistance took on the characteristics of a social movement. However despite the fact that hundreds of thousands were mobilized over a period of a few weeks it failed to attain the level of militancy and organization to crystallize into a sustained social movement. The followers of MLK in Montgomery Alabama and the SNCC students jamming segregated lunch counters were prepared to face lynch mobs and police and go to prison in their efforts to bring the system of Jim Crow to a halt. Neither the public sector workers nor their union leaders were prepared to take the dangerous steps of withholding their labor and thereby freeze up the public sector and create a genuine social crisis.

Now I am not saying this as a condemnation of either the workers or their trade union leaders. As I indicated trade unions rarely, or never create social movements and this follows from their role as negotiators and bargainers in the sale of labor power. A point I don't have time to develop. Moreover the workers were in a position of trying to defend traditional rights and privileges which generally is not a basis for a sustained, progressive social movement (although liberals and reactionaries often promote movements based on tradition.)

Workers movements of course do exist and are I believe fundamental. The general strikes and sit down strikes of the 1930's that led to the creation of the large industrial unions were social movements of the most profound character. But they were movements built and led by revolutionary socialists and based on a new industrial working class seeking to establish basic rights.

However even if the Wisconsin resistance fails to generate a new social movement this does not mean that it lacks profound political or social significance. In particular if unions aren't

particularly good at generating social movements, they can be effective in engaging in mass politics. This flows from their role as the major organized working class institution, and their role in mediating class conflict. I don't really have time to go into this in this presentation but maybe we can talk about in the discussion.

I believe that Wisconsin reflected a changing political framework and orientation for trade unions. The purges of the left from the leadership of the trade unions at the beginning of the cold war left the the most right wing segments of labor in charge of its national politics. This persisted despite the rank and file upsurge of the 1970' s and growing opposition to the war in Vietnam of the rank and file. It was only with the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 and the dismantling of much of the New Deal Social programs, completed by Clinton in the 90's that labor began to shift its orientation away from defense and celebration of "free world" capitalism to concern for the welfare of its rank and file. This shift, and it was relatively slow and slight, was signified by the ascension in 1995 to leadership of AFL-CIO by John Sweeny, president of SEIU, significantly a major service workers union, who deposed the reactionary, craft based leadership which had constructed by George Meany.

This new found liberalism resulted in a strengthened political alliance between labor and the more left or progressive wing of the Democratic Party, however the labor leadership remained suspicious and continued to distance themselves from the movement progressives and left forces outside the Democratic Party who were becoming increasingly critical of the neo-liberal direction and domination of the Democrats. This is what has been somewhat altered by the Wisconsin resistance and its aftermath.

What Wisconsin proved is that labor could not rely on the Democrats for significant popular mobilization against the

advanced and increasingly successful campaign of the Republicans to dismantle the public sector unions. To mobilize sufficient support outside their immediate ranks labor needed these movement forces, who participated significantly in building the popular mobilization in Madison.

This changed orientation is most clearly indicated in the level of labor support for the left populist upsurge against the austerity campaign - the Occupy Movement.

Now one shouldn't exaggerate the level of this support. It has been mostly passive and rhetorical, supporting the general goals of the occupiers and their right to protest, while not really taking organizational responsibility for the actual campaigns, or providing much in the way of resources-people or money. At the same time this does indicate a significant shift in labor politics, since until recently they would have distanced themselves, indeed denounced, such a movement which is clearly outside the Democratic Party, and in ways hostile to it.

Does this indicate a new and more independent political role for the trade for trade unions? I don't know. In the short run, ie the 2012 national election, they remain committed to the Democratic Party and the Obama administration, which they see reasonably as the only currently viable national political mechanism for opposing the Republicans who are out to destroy them.

However a significant wing of the trade union leadership, which does include genuine progressives, see the limitations of the national Democratic Party under its current leadership. And they just might reach out to movement progressives to form a better political instrument, and effort which could become the basis of a mass national political movement. If this does occur then we can look back at events in Wisconsin as a pivotal moment.

I want to end up where I began. Such a political initiative to be successful must be accompanied by a growing social movement. The Occupy upsurge shows an initial sprouting of such a movement but it itself has yet to crystallize and focus. I am not talking about formulating demands but rather more getting its social base, its core constituency straight. The “we are the 99%” slogan is brilliant in targeting the elite who are profiting from the current economic malaise but it really is not adequate to define a core constituency. There are questions of class, race, and gender that have to be confronted but that perhaps is another discussion.

QUESTIONS RAISED-----mel@math.uchicago.edu

1. What is the background to the campaign of union busting in Wisconsin and elsewhere? Was it primarily union hating Republicans out to get the Democrats by demolishing a basic ally, or are there deeper and more long-term goals?
2. Is the Wisconsin Resistance the start of a social movement, or does its significance lie possibly in generating a mass left Politics? What is the difference and what is the relationship of these two goals?
3. What is the relationship of trade unions, historically and structurally to mass social movements? To left politics?
4. What about the relationship of the trade unions to the Democratic Party? Can this change? Will it Change? How has events in Wisconsin affected this?

5. How about the relationship of labor to the Occupy upsurge? How is this related to Wisconsin? Will Occupy generate a mass social movement on which to base a mass labor/left politics?