

The union struggle

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A protester supports Wisconsin's state workers. Governor Scott Walker is threatening to lay off workers if the standoff over his budget bill, which would gut collective bargaining rights, doesn't end. [AttributionShare Alike Some rights reserved](#) by [mdfriendofhillary](#)

Labor unions, wrote Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, are "an indispensable element in social life . . . indeed a mouthpiece for the struggle for social justice." Having seen how Poland's workers fared under capitalism and communism, John Paul knew firsthand that neither the market nor the state can be counted on to automatically deliver justice for workers.

Labor unions in the U.S. played a huge role in improving workers' salaries, benefits and working conditions and thereby in helping to build a strong middle class. Since the 1940s, however, unions have fallen on hard times. In the face of global economic competition and increased corporate resistance to unions (and some laws that support that resistance), the number of unionized workers in the private sector has

fallen from 33 percent to 7 percent.

The current economic crisis has prompted state officials in Wisconsin, Ohio and elsewhere to try to further undermine the power of unions in the one arena in which they remain relatively strong—among public employees. In Wisconsin, for example, Governor Scott Walker, citing the state's budget problems, has pressed for passage of a bill that would not only require state workers to contribute more toward their pensions and health care but would strip them of the right to negotiate benefits and working conditions. The unions have accepted the need for increased contributions but have defied the effort to take away the right to collective bargaining, since to allow that step would be to accept the dismantling of the unions.

Whatever one thinks about public employee unions, it's inaccurate to blame them for the fiscal crisis in the states and misguided to use the crisis as the occasion to dismantle them. Budget woes are afflicting states that don't deal with public employee unions as well as those that do. And it was not public unions that caused the wild speculation on housing prices, the Wall Street meltdown, the recession, the double-digit unemployment and the subsequent drop in tax revenues.

It's true that some states have offered government employees generous retirement benefits while deferring the funding of those benefits to another day. That is a budget liability that has to be addressed either through an increase in taxes or a decrease in benefits. But historically there has been a logical reason to offer good benefits to government workers—their benefits package helps compensate for their low pay relative to comparable jobs in the private sector. And according to a report by the Economic Policy Institute, even with their good benefits, Wisconsin's state workers get less in total compensation than private-sector workers with a comparable education. The attack on public unions could deliver a virtual knockout blow to the union movement, and that would be a blow to all workers. For all their flaws, unions are still an indispensable element in social life, and the voice of workers is a vital counterweight to the voice of corporate and managerial power.