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STEWARD UPDATE



# PICKET LINE LESSONS:

**Strike Prep and More for Stewards  
from School Workers**

# Picket Line Lessons from School Worker Fights

Just a few months in and 2018 has already earned its place in labor history. A major upswell in strike actions—most notably by public school teachers and employees—has taken North America by storm. We haven't had this much high-profile education worker activity since the Chicago Teachers' Union Strike in 2012 that lasted for seven consecutive school days—the first large-scale strike the city had seen in 25 years. Teachers are striking and protesting today over a myriad of issues. Their successes offer lessons to union stewards across the continent.

"When people come together to deal with problems of education, the people that are actually working in schools need to be heard," Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis told the *Chicago Tribune* in 2012. "And I think this has been an opportunity for people across the nation to have their voice heard."

Those voices carried, and began to reverberate. Earlier this year, in St. Paul, Minnesota, a teachers' strike protesting budget cuts, low pay, and a dearth of state investment in schools was narrowly avoided at the eleventh hour. Some 85% of those who took part in a strike authorization vote on Jan. 31 had been ready to walk out.

Then, in West Virginia, school workers struck, with a demand for higher pay, a stop to skyrocketing healthcare costs (and intrusive measures), and an increase in school funding. It ended after nine days when the governor signed off on a 5% pay raise for state workers. While some teachers say the pay raise is more panacea than a proper resolution to the issues at hand, the West Virginia protest has already had a far-reaching effect.

"West Virginia has long been one of the most 'underdog' states in the nation, and we feel like we've been abandoned by both political parties on the national level," said Paul Nelson, a rank-and-file West

Virginia teacher involved with the strike. "The power we showed and the attention we received uplifted the entire state. I received a few emails from students' parents expressing support, and teachers rallying at their local schools frequently had folks bring them food!"

Since then, teachers and school employees in Oklahoma, Kentucky, Arizona and North Carolina have fought for better pay, more secure pensions, and more resources for public schools, flooding their state capitals with a rallying cry demanding a better future for themselves and their students.

"West Virginia set off a powder keg of activity," said Noah Karvelis, a Phoenix-based music teacher and organizer with Arizona Educators United. "All of these states have been an incredible inspiration and example for us. I think potentially you will see similar actions for other workers across the nation who have been taken advantage of and neglected for far too long."

According to Karvelis, the Arizona teachers enjoyed significant public support from the community following their headline-grabbing rally at the Arizona state capitol (another page torn from the West Virginia playbook) to protest low pay and low state education funding. Their #RedforEd campaign continued to gain steam, and stewards were elbow-deep in strike preparations.

"Our statewide walk-ins encouraged students, parents and educators to come together in bold solidarity," Karvelis said, "They won a 19% raise and other gains."

At Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, hundreds of support, library, and administrative staff have been on strike since March 5 due to a battle over proposed changes to their pension plan. At the time of this writing, a tentative agreement has been reached between their union, CUPE 2424, and the university—but it took five long weeks to reach that point,

and according to Kevin Skerrett, CUPE's pension researcher, strike preparations began well in advance.

"The logistical work preparing for strike action had begun in February, and included naming and training picket captains, setting up picket shifts and schedules, renting a strike headquarters and a picket line trailer," he said. "Pensions are a pretty technical issue, and the more preparation and communication, the better-prepared members will be. I think all of the steps listed above have been important in making this a successful strike action. I would add that, over the course of the strike action, the union had a small team of communication specialists—especially people working on short, well-edited videos from the picket lines—that have been brilliant and hugely important in building and maintaining membership morale."

He also advocated for stewards and supporters to help build the strike by taking the dispute off campus and out into the community, and stressed the importance of connecting their own struggle to those of union workers elsewhere. Skerrett said, "We take real inspiration from the recent wave of strike and other job action among teachers across the US and the rolling University and College union pension strikes across the UK. We have a great deal to learn from each other in these struggles, and ultimately, reverse the terrible trajectory of the past 30 years of neoliberal capitalism."

"The workers, particularly educators right now, are showing that there is power in solidarity and unified action," Karvelis adds. "It's a powerful, powerful message to send. I think we may be witnessing a turning tide in organized labor in America. It's tremendously exciting to be a part of and to bear witness to, to say the least."

"I hope that there is a resurgence in labor, but it is going to have to be in a new mold; we can't just go back to New Deal glory days in this era of globalization," Nelson says when asked about the overall impact the West Virginia teachers' strike.

"Don't settle for too little!" he adds. "We've been doing that for too long in West Virginia. We still need to hold extractive industries accountable and have them pay their fair share."

—Kim Kelly is a writer, editor and organizer based in Brooklyn.

# LESSONS FROM WISCONSIN: AFTER SEVEN YEARS OF UNION BUSTING, WORKERS HARD PUT TO RECOVER

**I**t was a rout. The November 2010 mid-term election turned purple Wisconsin red, giving Republicans the keys to the governor's mansion and both chambers of the statehouse. "Wisconsin is open for business," Governor-elect Scott Walker declared, echoing campaign promises of more and better-paying jobs.

In a state flunking economic tests for wage and job growth, a lot of workers bought into that message—much, they would later find, to their own detriment.

Taking office in January 2011, Walker and the legislature launched a full-out assault on unions. They slammed public workers as overpaid and rammed through quick rule changes to advance Act 10—a bill decimating collective bargaining rights for almost every Wisconsin public worker, including:

- No bargaining on benefits, rules or working conditions.
- No bargaining on wage increases exceeding pre-determined caps.
- No wage increases until new contracts are settled.
- No contracts longer than one year.
- No dues check-off or compulsory dues or fees.
- No unions without annual recertification votes.

Protests erupted throughout the state—the largest drew 100,000 to the Capitol in Madison. Support and supporters poured in from all over the country and around the world. Despite public opposition and weeks of controversy, legislators maneuvered the bill through.

Walker told private sector unions they'd be safe, but a video surfaced of him assuring a campaign donor that his "divide and conquer" strategy would target public sector unions first and hit the private sector later with so-called right to work (RTW) laws. Although lawmakers initially repudiated RTW, they passed it in March 2015.

The prosperity they promised didn't materialize. Instead, workers suffered sluggish job growth, stagnant wages, a shrinking middle class and gaping income inequality, with much of the blame on declining unionization—down 40% since Act 10. Comparisons to Minnesota—Wisconsin's deep blue, labor-friendly and prosperous neighbor to the west—are stark, striking and embarrassing.

## WHAT'S TO LEARN FROM ALL THIS?

■ **FIRST: ORGANIZE NOW.** By the time a crisis hits, it's too late. Some unions had gotten way too comfortable and were ill-prepared for what happened. Learn about the difference between business unionism and solidarity unionism. Unions practicing the latter fared much better in both public and private sectors.

■ **THE BIGGEST THREAT IS LACK OF DILIGENCE.** A union is not likely to survive the worst of times if it didn't do much during the good. Poor representation and lack of personal, honest and engaging communication is a sure path to member apathy or, worse, antipathy.

■ **KNOW THE ENEMY.** We learned the hard way how the Koch Brothers and their allies pulled the strings in our state. Knowing the who, what, when and how of labor foes is crucial. Remember: They play the long game and with particular effect since the 1980s.

■ **MIDTERMS MATTER.** Low voter turnout in midterms favors antiunion candidates. Wisconsin's 2010 election opened the door to gerrymandering and voter suppression laws, ensuring opponents' power for years to come. Union efforts for voter registration and get-out-the-vote are as important in midterms as the general election.

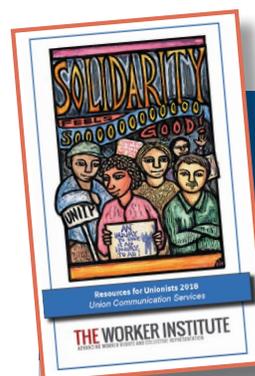
■ **IT'S TIME FOR ROLE REVERSAL.** The labor movement is the only entity exclusively devoted to working people, yet we have ceded our natural power to

political parties with often ineffective to fatal results. What if we marshalled our resources instead to make our movement an independent, driving force for workers? What if politicians needed us more than we needed them and maybe even feared us instead of the other way around? It's not a new thought, but it's a powerful one. How to get there is a big conversation now being had throughout the labor movement and beyond.

■ **BACK TO BASICS.** Unionization created America's middle class, and the decline of unions has meant the decline of the middle class, hurting the entire economy. More people need to know: mutual prosperity based on fundamental worker rights is possible. With so many people struggling, it's a simple, unifying message that can build a movement for economic justice for all. That's not hype; it's history.

—Kathy Wilkes is a labor writer and editor based in Madison, Wisconsin.

Unionist.com offers many resources, including Nancy MacLean's *Democracy in Chains*, Gordon Lafer's *The One Percent Solution*, and Bill Barry's *Don't Trump on Us: Making our Unions Great Again*.



## UCS 2018 BOOKS

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# Lessons from King's Assassination Echo Today

In early April, 2018, unionists and activists flocked to Memphis, Tennessee to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and to celebrate the remarkable legacy he left us. There were lectures and panels, church services and marches, all culminating in a ceremony on April 4. The ceremony took place at the National Civil Rights Museum, which incorporates the original structure of the Lorraine Motel, where Dr. King was shot. At 6:04 PM, a bell tolled 39 times to mark the years of his life and the continuing power of his vision.

## CENTRAL CONNECTIONS

Central to King's legacy is the connection he preached between racial and economic justice. He was explicit about the link between labor and civil rights as far back as 1961, when he addressed the AFL-CIO convention:

"Our needs are identical with labor's needs—decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community. That is why Negroes support labor's demands and fight laws which curb labor."

Dr. King discussed that theme throughout his life—adding, later, the necessity of peace. Among the religious and civil rights leaders who spoke was AFSCME President Lee Saunders. Dr. King had come to Memphis 50 years earlier for one purpose: to support the city's garbage workers in their efforts to secure a contract with the city. AFSCME represented the workers, then and now, and the robust union presence at the commemorative events highlighted the coalition between labor and civil rights.

In fact, King had long tied the fight for civil rights with the fight for decent wages, safe working conditions and benefits. The famed 1963 demonstration in Washington—where he delivered his "I

Have A Dream" speech—was officially named the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom. The march was led by A. Philip Randolph, president of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters, and supported by Walter Reuther, president of the United Auto Workers, which provided significant funding. In 1968, before his death, King was working on the Poor People's Campaign, which aimed to petition the federal government to pass an Economic Bill of Rights—for people of all races. That mantle has been picked up this year by Rev. Dr. William Barber II, who is leading a new Poor People's Campaign and who rose to prominence as an architect of the Moral Mondays movement in North Carolina, which included unions and union demands.

The garbage workers' strike that brought King to Memphis began on February 1, 1968, when two city sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker, were crushed to death when their ancient and substandard truck malfunctioned. (Even today, garbage collection remains a dangerous job for those without union protections.) Eleven days later, most of the city's sanitation and sewage workers walked off the job. For years, they had performed the hardest, dirtiest work in the city with the lowest wages and, equally importantly, no respect. Taylor Rogers, an organizer with Local 1733 said, "If you bend your back, people can ride it. But if you stand up straight, people can't ride your back. And that's what we did. We stood up straight."

Over the subsequent days, garbage piled up around the city, but Mayor Henry Loeb—backed by the white establishment—declared the strike illegal and refused to meet with union leadership. Much of the sanitation department had tried to join AFSCME Local 1733, but Loeb said that the city would never recognize the union, or as President Lee Saunders said, more accurately at the commemoration, "The mayor vowed he would never 'sign a contract with a Negro union.'"

Memphis, like much of the South, was thoroughly anti-union and, like the rest of North America, stubbornly racist. Loeb tried many tactics to keep unions out, and that applied to private sector as well as public. But opposition was especially fierce to unions that organized black workers—something seen today in the opposition to public sector workers across the US. The public-sector workforce remains disproportionately African-American for many reasons including strong anti-discrimination practices.

The strikers had devised an appeal to the city's conscience with the simple slogan, "I Am A Man." But the strike dragged on. At the request of local church and labor leaders, Dr. King made his first visit to Memphis in February, and appeared at meetings and in street actions. Still, the city refused to recognize the union or negotiate. But the militancy and persistence of the strikers had another effect: the membership of Local 1733 doubled. King returned to Memphis in April. He was killed on April 4. It took a massive demonstration on April 8 to force Mayor Loeb to relent, and on April 16, the strikers received union recognition and wage increases. It's in homage to them that AFSCME—the largest public sector union—collaborated on an I AM 2018 campaign this spring to build more awareness of the historical and contemporary connection of labor and civil rights.

## "TWIN-HEADED CREATURE"

Dr. King's relationship with labor isn't secret, but neither is it widely known. Today, most people across the American political spectrum praise Dr. King—even those who would have opposed him in 1968 and who oppose labor today. As he said in 1961, "That is why the labor-hater and labor-baiter is virtually always a twin-headed creature spewing anti-Negro epithets from one mouth and anti-labor propaganda from the other mouth."

—Alec Dubro. The writer is a veteran labor communicator based in Washington, D.C.

Despite having similar origins, the North American labor movement has taken distinctly different paths in Canada and the United States. Answering why this has happened is the subject of Barry Eidlin's soon-to-be-released book, *Labor and the Class Idea in the United States and Canada*. It's a fascinating question, made even more urgent as the *Janus* decision threatens to throw the American labor movement into further upheaval.

Eidlin says the way in which each country's supreme court treats unions is one factor in why things have diverged so much. "The Supreme Court of Canada (SCC) has affirmed the centrality of collective action for ensuring workers' constitution rights," he says, while, "the U.S. Supreme Court has gone towards [unionization] being a free speech issue." It's a stark contrast.

The SCC has not always sided with unions, but Eidlin argues that the goal of Canadian legislators has been to balance labor relations such that there is relatively little upheaval. "In practice, even people who might be anti-union still support strengthening the labor relations regime because it keeps a lid on labor conflict," says Eidlin, a sociology professor at McGill University in Montreal.

A 2015 SCC decision called *Saskatchewan Federation of Labor v. Saskatchewan* ruled that collective bargaining represents the collective free expression of workers and is therefore constitutionally protected, overturning a 1987 decision.

Canada's relatively high union density raises the stakes for ensuring harmonious labor relations. Average unionization in Canada is 28.8% (as of 2014) with 15.2% of private sector and 71.3% of public sector workers covered by union protections. When a system is premised on keeping the peace between bosses and workers, legislative gains and protections are an instrument of control, even when they favor workers over management.

But, it also means that the kinds of legislative attacks that Canadian workers face are more likely to come in the form of limiting strike parameters. Many workers are regulated when it comes to striking and can only strike for short periods of time per day. Some have no real rights to strike at all if their work is considered to be

an essential service (like a paramedic or a nurse).

While the *Janus* decision will have no legal impact on Canadian unions, Charles Smith warns that the cultural shift it presents poses a big threat in Canada, as Canadian right-wing politicians often draw inspiration and ideas from the United States.

Smith, a political science professor at the University of Saskatchewan, argues that Canadian legislators don't need to try and impose right-to-work legislation as tools like back-to-work legislation or other legislative limits to strike, "work very well in disciplining labor. There hasn't been the same need to pick fights with unions."

Smith says that public sector unions in Canada, "have been far more militant and organized than in the U.S.," which has helped to protect the public sector from U.S.-style attack. The low-level of privatization in public services has helped as well: "Public sector unions haven't had to face profit-driven institutions," unlike Canadian private sector unions, says Smith, whose density rate has been in steady decline.

Andrea Calver is a long-time labor activist from Toronto who is gathering research for a membership engagement strategy at California state universities. She is currently based in Sacramento, and is the membership engagement

and campaigns coordinator with the Ontario Confederation of University Faculty Associations. She sees *Janus* as a profound warning signal for Canadian activists.

Watching Californian labor activists gear up their organizing efforts in the face of *Janus* has ignited Calver's sense of urgency: "You can't let anything go, even something small, because they never let it stop. The lesson we need to learn is that we need to push back against every single legislative thing that ties the hands of unions, because over decades it adds up."

Carolyn Egan, president of the United Steelworkers Toronto Area Council, echoes Calver's call to action. The council represents USW members in both the private and public sector in Toronto. "There is real concern in Canada about the outcome of the *Janus* case," she says. "It is a clear attack on public sector unions and could have a devastating impact on their ability to defend members and take political action on behalf of all working people."

Calver says that for her, the big effect of the *Janus* decision is what it teaches union activists: "With money and decades of time, the right wing could do some really serious organizing in Canada. It's part and parcel of what's happening in the American labor movement."

—Nora Loreto is a Quebec-based freelance writer and editor at the Canadian Association of Labour Media.

## WHAT JANUS MEANS FOR UNIONS IN CANADA

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**MAKE SURE YOUR MEMBERS ARE REGISTERED TO VOTE**

As an OPEIU steward, your help is needed to ensure that all OPEIU members are registered to vote in the November midterm elections. Everything is on the line for working families, and the votes of working people could decide whether we have elected officials looking out for our interests or those more concerned with furthering the interests of corporate America.

The margin in the Senate is extremely tight; if Democrats pick up two seats, they can flip the majority. There are great candidates on the side of working families running in places like Nevada, Arizona and Mississippi who can make that power shift a reality. A shift in the House is even more possible.

Do your members know who is running for office in your state? Do they know where the candidates stand on critical issues such as job creation, fair wages, collective bargaining rights, healthcare and education? Are they registered to vote and are they able to volunteer to help get their coworkers, friends and neighbors out to the polls on November 6? It's not too early to be thinking about this. If your local union doesn't have a GOTV plan in place, now's the time to develop one.

So, ask your members if they are registered to vote. If they're not, encourage them to go to OPEIU's website at [opeiu.org](http://opeiu.org) and click on the register to vote button, or go directly to [vote.gov](http://vote.gov) to register.

Encourage members to ensure their family, friends and coworkers are also registered. Every state has different registration deadlines, so don't delay.

Finally, are your members participating in the J.B. Moss VOTE Fund? OPEIU established the VOTE Fund so we have the necessary funds to support pro-worker political candidates and to push for legislation that matters to us as working people. Just \$1 per paycheck can make a huge difference and ensure OPEIU members are heard and our interests protected.

The bottom line to remember: You can't vote in November unless you're registered. Register now at [opeiu.org](http://opeiu.org) or [vote.gov](http://vote.gov).



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