

# No Unions: Government By The Rich, For The Rich

By: **Ken Bernstein**, Special to CNN  
February 23, 2011 6:44 p.m. EST

Recent weeks have seen attacks on public employees in several states. In New Jersey, Ohio, and Wisconsin, newly elected Republican governors are seeking to remove the right to collective bargaining, except perhaps on wages, and to eliminate or shift a major portion of the costs for pensions upon the workers.

Longstanding procedures that guarantee due process for experienced teachers, commonly called tenure, are being targeted for elimination.

Let's be clear what is going on. Only three of the top 10 spenders in the most recent elections were unions. Among the others were organizations representing business interests, such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and individual corporations themselves. Both corporations and unions were unleashed by the Citizens United decision.

If unions can be broken in the public sector, this will further tilt the political playing field on behalf of corporate interests and their Republican allies. This will also silence one of the few remaining vehicles that advocate on behalf of ordinary people in this country.

Too few Americans know labor history and how they have benefited from the efforts of unions. We have a 40-hour work week, defined benefits, higher wages, paid vacations and sick leave, largely as the result of union activity in the 20th century. We built a middle-class society in the period after World War II, also a period when the work force was, compared with today, heavily unionized.

Public employees, especially teachers, are usually better educated than their peers doing equivalent work in the private sector, but usually have lower salaries. Benefits, including pensions and health care, are part of what they receive in lieu of higher salaries.

It is worth knowing that average salaries and incomes are higher in states that are more heavily unionized. Simultaneously, if one insists upon using test scores as a measure of academic performance, it is worth noting that states with unionized work forces perform at a higher level than right to work states, according to studies and analysis. We have known for years that there is a strong correlation between family income and performance on such measurements.

There are serious financial stresses on state and local governments. States have seen revenues drop as a result of job losses. This has led to lower revenues from sales and income taxes.

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Local governments are heavily dependent upon real property taxes based on the market value of properties, a value that has collapsed in the wake of the multiple crises of bankruptcies, foreclosures, and people walking away from properties whose value has dropped below what they owe on their mortgages.

But how have public employees contributed to this crisis? Why are not those who are profiting from economic times, in many cases with bailouts from federal funds, not paying appropriate taxes to sustain governments at all levels? And given how much the lack of regulatory oversight contributed to our current financial mess, why is it that those who created the mess are not being held accountable -- and instead, middle-class Americans who work to serve their fellow citizens are being targeted as scapegoats.

Some Republican governors and legislators are claiming they are doing what they were elected to do. I would remind them, and their compatriots in the U.S. House of Representatives, that the greatest concern of the American people is jobs -- they want jobs for themselves, for their families and friends, and in the future for their children.

Most Americans want those who are flourishing financially to contribute their fair share in taxes. Republican Gov. Scott Walker of Wisconsin took a state that had a surplus and pushed it into a deficit. Now he wants to put the entire burden of that on the backs of public employees.

Let's be clear. The attacks are concerted. Wisconsin, historically an important place of unionized workers, is an important battleground. If the public unions can be broken there, using an artificially created deficit as an excuse to attack them, no union -- of workers public or private -- will be safe from attack.

Without unions, workers will lose many of the protections against abusive employers. Wages for all will be depressed, even as corporate profits soar. The American dream will be destroyed for millions. And we will have a government of the corporations, by the already powerful, for the wealthy. I think Lincoln and most of our other great presidents would be ashamed to see what is happening.

*The opinions in this commentary are solely those of Kenneth Bernstein.*

**Note:** *Kenneth Bernstein is a National Board certified social studies teacher at Eleanor Roosevelt High School in Greenbelt, Maryland, where he serves as the lead union representative for the teachers. He blogs as "teacherken" at Daily Kos and has written for The New York Times, Teacher, and Huffington Post. He is a 2010 Washington Post Agnes Meyer Outstanding Teacher.*