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Wisconsin Governor Is Not Telling the Truth

Statement from AAUP President Cary Nelson:

Disguising it as an effort to balance the budget, Wisconsin’s governor Scott Walker is seeking effectively to strip most public employees of their ability to negotiate their salaries, benefits, and working conditions. With salary increases to be limited to the cost of living, those teachers now denied a living wage will spend the rest of their lives in state-enforced poverty.

What’s more, several key provisions in Walker’s proposed legislation have nothing to do with budget savings. They are about breaking unions and making public employees second-class citizens. Consider this: unionized employees all across the county have charitable contributions, parking fees, union dues, and other expenses automatically deducted from their salaries. Walker is only going to prohibit the deduction for union dues.

Then consider this: unionized employees have always had the right to call for a vote to decertify their union, but Walker wants to harass unions by requiring a new vote to certify a union every year. Not only will unnecessary annual votes held all across the state force employees to take time away from their other duties; they will also waste state revenues. Why would a governor concerned about the Wisconsin budget want to spend money this way?

Another nasty strategy is a proposed requirement that unions have to negotiate a new contract every year. Of course both rational state budgeting and personal financial planning benefit from multi-year contracts. What’s more, union contracts can take weeks or months to negotiate. Wisconsin’s public employees will have to waste time and money on nonstop bargaining. And the state, once again, will take on added costs itself. Walker is clearly willing to spend state revenues on union busting.

Unions often win “fair share” agreements so that all employees who receive union-negotiated salaries and benefits must pay a portion of the union’s expenses. Walker would make that illegal.

If all the provisions pass, faculty members and graduate students in fact would be singled out and lose all their bargaining rights. Two campuses that recently established faculty unions by democratic vote would have them taken away. The graduate student employees would be stripped of their unions. University of Wisconsin hospitals would no longer be unionized. Their hard won voice in campus governance would be silenced.
In the only sections of the law that do result in savings, Walker wants to restrict salary increases and require employees to pay more for health care and retirement benefits. Those provisions should be subjects of negotiation, not policies imposed by the legislature.

Governing by bluster and disinformation is little better than demagoguery. Wisconsin’s citizens deserve better. Public employees provide critical services and bind our communities together. Scapegoating them tears our communities apart. Willfully depressing their wages and benefits only further depresses the state economy. Everyone who believes in employee rights and a healthy democracy should oppose this deceptively promoted legislation.

Like so many other principled struggles, the battle in Wisconsin to retain faculty rights is really a struggle on behalf of faculty members and public sector employees everywhere. It is also a struggle over the soul of our democracy. Colleagues in Michigan and Ohio are already at work to defeat similar legislation in their states, though it appears the Wisconsin legislature is poised to be the first that acts. In the coming weeks and months, a massive local and national campaign will be required if public employees are to retain the collaborative workplace that collective bargaining at its best makes possible.

Cary Nelson
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