

Wisconsin's Lost Strike Moment

- - - -

DAN S. WANG & NICOLAS LAMPERT

INTRODUCTION BY JEN BLAIR

I watched the Wisconsin Uprising from Illinois, where teachers' right to strike has been sharply curtailed and where there have been several legislative attempts to absolve the state of its public-employee pension obligations. I'm not speaking of Illinois lawmakers' pensions—those are kept separate—but my pension, and my father's and mother's. My parents are teachers; I work in student support at a public university. By law we do not receive Social Security benefits, leaving us to depend on our pensions after retirement.

Whatever mythologies are out there about stratospheric teachers' salaries, public employees throughout the U.S. are not well-paid, and Illinois is no exception. Changes to our pensions are unconstitutional in Illinois, and lawmakers have raided and underfunded them for 30 years now. But law in Illinois is... actually it is a joke to talk about law in Illinois.

I live and work in Chicago at one of Illinois' lowest-cost and lowest-paid universities. Our students are poor, have families, jobs, debt. They have to work, most of them, and they don't know if they'll be able to pay off the student loans they're incurring. Many are part-time, and consequently our graduation rate is terrible. Our students are some of the most amazing, wonderful, intelligent, worldly, caring people I have ever had the privilege to meet.

When that whole business in Wisconsin first hit, my union had been negotiating our contract for almost 900 days. But as labor negotiations ground on and on, the thought kept occurring to me that perhaps I might look for a job in Wisconsin. Wisconsin, the heart of Midwest progressive politics. Beautiful southern Wisconsin, with its landscape just a little less flat than

that of Illinois. Wisconsin, where Milwaukee had elected a socialist mayor in my parents' lifetimes! My own personal idealized state. I've heard a lot of U.S. citizens threaten to up and move to Canada (as if they want us) if things here get much worse. I thought about Kenosha or Beloit, Madison or Milwaukee.

I mean sure Wisconsin has a 24-hour waiting period and mandatory "counselling" if you want an abortion, but Women's rights are in the toilet across the country. And yes Milwaukee's even more racially divided than Chicago, but that's only because Chicago has more people. The distance between the most racially divided U.S. city and the third most divided is not far, in miles and in culture. I've dealt with racists my whole life. (My recommendation, shouting "oh my GOD! Did you just SAY that? OUT LOUD?! That's RACIST!!!") Gotta shame them. And woman haters, who I have not yet managed to shame.

Personal interactions don't change structures, and civil liberties are under attack across the country. Social justice movements are fractured and fractionalized, and we have a very real oligarchy corrupting politics. I could see this happen as, right after Walker unveiled his big plan to hurt public employee's lives and families, similar bills rolled out in states across the Midwest and the country.

Those of us born in and after the late 1960s-1970s have, all our lives witnessed a steady, rolling retrenchment of civil liberties, human rights, and economic opportunity and security. For every success, such as those in the area of LGBT rights, there have been a seemingly endless string of defeats. 2011 was particularly difficult as, in state after, state legislative attacks on labor were paired with attacks on reproductive rights (and especially on the funding of Planned Parenthood). These attacks sprang up seemingly out of the blue.

In the middle of all this was the Wisconsin Uprising, so massive and exciting, so populist! Friends in Wisconsin, including my friend Dan Wang, were encouraging those of us in nearby states to come and support the Wisconsinites. I finally made it to Madison on March 12th, and it was the most joyous and energetic protest I've ever seen. Most of the protest signs were handmade—the movement had engaged people's creativity. Our hearts were in it. It did make me a little uncomfortable when in a speech one of the Wisconsin Senators referred to himself as part of the "Fabulous 14" because it was clear that what was really fabulous were the people of Wisconsin. But that was a momentary discomfort, and I went home to Chicago exhilarated.

The example of the Wisconsin uprising helped my own university's union to organize the membership and finally settle our contract. But just as it seemed like something big would happen in the country, the Wisconsin Uprising kind of died away. It got legislative, which in the era of no-record electronic voting machines is not a good thing. Why did the occupation end and the legislation begin? What happened to the Wisconsin Uprising?

Dan Wang had been writing about the uprising from its start. When people would ask me to explain what the hell was happening, I'd send them to Dan's blog as it contained an incredibly thoughtful and, to my mind, true analysis of the movement. A year before the Wisconsin Uprising started I had heard Nicolas Lampert of Justseeds' Artists Cooperative give a talk entitled "Organize! What the Artists' Union & The American Artists' Congress Can Teach Us Today." Nicolas, who teaches Art at UW Milwaukee, was also writing and speaking about the events in Wisconsin.

Nicolas and Dan's essay "Wisconsin's Lost Strike Moment" is invaluable to anyone who wants to make sense of the Wisconsin Uprising. The essay details with the events and aftermath, asking the necessary question, "When has labor won a significant victory without calling a strike?" More than anything else I've read, this essay frames the movement and analyzes how it was weakened.

The new, democratic, decentralized Occupy/Decolonize movements are demanding more than jobs and unions—a good sign. Still there have been worrying incidents of racial and gender violence within the Occupations. The Wisconsin uprising proves that even a leaderless movement can be co-opted when imaginations fail and internal divisions weaken it. As Dan and Nicholas state: "In order to win, we need to imagine and articulate the society that we want to live in."

– Jen Blair

— — — —

Two months into the Wisconsin Uprising a movement still exists, but where it goes from here is unclear. The so-called Budget Repair Bill that will end collective bargaining rights for most public employees in Wisconsin is currently tied up in the courts. Legal challenges will likely go on for several months, maybe longer. In the meantime, risks, challenges, and contradictions loom within a movement that can be described as painfully moderate. Wisconsin citizens have arisen and protested in massive numbers. The sleeping giant that is the labor movement + working class solidarity has awoken. But the outlook is not entirely optimistic.

The Wisconsin Uprising has reflected the strengths and weaknesses of the organized labor movement. It has organized huge numbers of people and demonstrated the collective power of public and private unions to combat Walker, the GOP, and corporate greed. But it has also become sadly reflective of the labor movement's leaders—cautious, allergic to direct action and civil disobedience, and most of all, adverse to calling a strike. Labor leadership has instead curtailed a movement that had real potential to defeat Walker and real potential to demand and create a more just and equal

society, and transformed it into a movement that has become all about protest marches, recall efforts, and votes for Democrats. But before one screams, “These tactics were necessary! Labor could ill afford turning public opinion against them with a strike!” ask yourself, when has labor won a significant victory without calling a strike? And when has a social justice movement won significant demands without the one-two punch of electoral politics *combined* with civil disobedience and actions that led to mass arrests? And lastly, for those still not convinced, if voting for Democrats is the panacea to all our problems, why were so many of us living in economic stress in Wisconsin *already long before the uprising* with little to no hope that our situation would improve?

To critique a movement that started with such promise and then rapidly devolved, we offer this brief appraisal of what we’ve seen thus far and what we hope to see develop. For the purposes of this analysis, we can talk about four key moments/storylines, in the overlapping order that they happened.

The first week.

The flight of the 14 senate Democrats.

The events and non-events of March 9/10.

The April 5 election and aftermath.

1. In terms of outrage and energy turning into the mass mobilization that persists two months later, the narrative of the first week remains of primary importance. Recall the rapidly developing chain of linked events. The active opposition to Governor Scott Walker and the GOP agenda went from a small, mostly student-led protest on Monday, February 14, to sustained demonstrations of 12k and 30k only days later, capped in its first phase by a day long rally of 70k people on the first Saturday.

In that short time there were sizable public school student walk-outs, firefighters and police marching in solidarity with workers, a three-day teacher sick-out (essentially a non-picket strike) in Madison, and a successful effort to clog the public hearings that in turn triggered a spontaneous occupation of the Capitol lasting nearly two weeks. In the first week, each act of unexpected militancy on the part of one constituency pushed all other constituencies toward taking their own risks. This was the moment of a collective, leaderless, and organic constitution of a social movement, its evolution measured in hours, not days. For those who were in Madison at any point in those first seven days or so, it was *exhilarating*.

The collectively hailed movement changed participants, especially through the occupation, which over those days became one of the most intensely moving political social spaces seen or experienced outside of Tahrir Square. The newly uninhibited desire to communicate—expressed in countless clever and entertaining protest signs and performances—combined

with the shared sense that Walker's assault targeted whole groups, helped to create novel socialities in which political expression and shared feeling with strangers became a new norm. The new socialities, the rising class consciousness, the unleashed creativity in expression, the immanent power of self-organized action, and the snowballing impacts of tactical escalation—all products of the earliest stage—remain the most vital achievements of the movement, and bode well for the months and years of struggle ahead.

2. On the morning of the first Thursday (February 17) the rumor and then the confirmed news of the 14 senate Democrats fleeing to Illinois sent waves of excitement through the occupied Capital and the throngs on the square. It was exactly the action we needed and fit the string of escalations over those early days perfectly. The flight of the 14 and consequent denial of a quorum took control away from the Republicans. It was an act of aggression, a true counterattack that served as an *escalation*. Every escalation risks a loss of support, a desertion of the nervous, the unsure, and the moderate. But in each of the earlier escalations—the walkouts, sick-outs, the occupation, etc—resolve stiffened and excitement grew massively. Thus, in escalating the standoff in that moment, the 14 joined the movement and pushed it along. In exercising a comparatively direct power over the Republicans, we don't mind saying that the 14 took the momentary lead in the movement. They saw the opportunity, made their move, reaped positive attention, and put Walker and Fitzgerald on the defensive, making them worry about desertions from those wavering on the Republican side.

But precisely because the 14 are elected officials, the move opened up a whole front of legalistic minutiae, opaque and inaccessible to the vast majority of the citizenry. At the same time, as a media storyline, the 14 drowned out the other risk-taking constituencies. As movement voices, the senate Dems presented solutions in terms of legislative compromise and electoral strategy. While we credit them for their timely move, for all the above reasons the flight of the 14—ie, the insertion of themselves into the movement—in hindsight represents a structural *moderation* from within the movement.

This was confirmed when some of the returning 14 spoke to 150,000-plus who gathered around the Capital for a huge rally on Saturday, March 12. They spoke almost exclusively of the movement as an electoral effort, and neglected to credit the chain of escalations that made their own move possible. This was true, too, for Rev. Jesse Jackson on that day, and at rallies in Madison and Milwaukee. Leaders of the largest unions, WEAC President Mary Bell and AFSCME Council 24's Marty Beil, also called for the ballot box, never once mentioning that organized labor has the ultimate weapon: work stoppage. The majority of the crowd, effectively administered a dose of moderation, headed down State Street after the celebrities of the movement,



Caption goes here.
Orae militatibus eture
et reseque offic te
consequam exerum
veliaturs ili sit.

Photo by Lorem Ipsum

the Wisconsin 14, spoke. For us, the lesson of the day was, the movement grassroots would do well by refraining from over-valORIZING the 14. And we would do better by reflecting on the actions of fellow workers and global citizens in Egypt who inspired us during the first week—the ones who peacefully toppled a thirty-year autocrat partly thanks to a general strike. The questions of the day, for all but especially for the union rank-and-file were, does labor leadership actually represent the best interest of the working class? And why are we only organizing against Walker and the Republicans? Why not pressure the Democrats and labor leaders just as hard?

3. March 9 and 10 stand as the dates that a strike would have made most sense but did not happen; the fact is, the strategy of escalation was abandoned when it most mattered. Walker's strategy of waiting out the movement had failed; after two and a half weeks of senate stalemate and daily demonstrations, it was clear that the movement wasn't going anywhere. Rather than compromise, and being worried about cracks in Republican lawmaker unity, he and senate majority leader Fitzgerald rammed through his union-busting bill on the evening of March 9. This was accomplished by splitting "fiscal" from "non-fiscal" issues from the bill, circumventing the 14 Democrats who had blocked quorum, and by advancing a hastily called vote in a deceitful move of still unsettled legality.

In other words, on March 9, rather than back down Walker raised the ante yet again, and to a level for which there could only have been one kind of escalation in response: a strike across sectors and occupations. Talk of a general strike, both fanciful and serious, existed during the first three weeks of the struggle. It was visible in flyers and signs, the conversations happening around the square, and most particularly from the IWW and the South Central Federation of Labor (a Wisconsin federation of nearly one hundred labor organizations representing 45,000 workers.) By February 21, the beginning of the second week, the SCFL had endorsed a one-day general strike but did not have the authority to call one. From the point of view of the raging non-unionized grassroots, and much of the rank and file, a one-day strike should have been called on the day that Walker signed the anti-union bill at the very least. The hot potato then would have been thrown back in Walker's hands, confronting him with the queasiness of having to carry out his stated threats to fire public workers. But it did not happen. The union leadership responded with words, not actions, thereby severing the chain of escalations, and *accepted a defeat*. By this time the movement had for all practical purposes become identified, including from within, as union-led, leaving the non-union grassroots with nowhere to channel their outrage, energy, and willingness to share risk. A precious historic opportunity was lost.

Here the lessons for the grassroots are at least two. First, that union leadership is, like the Democrats, wedded to a narrow and ultimately conservative set of interests. Their primary considerations include the short-term job security of their members, the viability of their organizations apart from the greater public good, and, above all, the easiest ways to ensure the flow of member dues, above all. Secondly, and at a deeper level, that both trade and labor unions are in essence defensive formations, there to protect a standard of living often originally won under comparatively favorable labor market conditions. Moving into uncharted political territory, much less contributing to the movement a visionary element, is not the natural tendency of the modern union. Even more so for a labor movement that has been steadily declining since Reagan fired the air-traffic controllers in 1981, and before that, the Taft-Hartley Act (1947) curtailed the legality of strikes, making massive concessions under the smokescreen of collective bargaining the standard course of action for organized labor. Yet, 2011 has witnessed Republican governors attack even this last recourse—collective bargaining—across the Midwest. Win now and defeat the GOP's onslaught against the last stronghold of middle class economic security, and all things public. Or lose and send the demoralizing message to the nation and the world that hundreds of thousands of protestors, a two-week occupation of the Capital, and public opinion on the side of labor still could not produce a victory in Wisconsin. In times like this, when public unions are fighting for their very existence, and a panoply of constituencies face serious threat, all tactics are needed to win, including strikes and direct action. No action can be ruled out.

4. Even before the March 9/10 episode, the April 5 election for Wisconsin Supreme Court was recognized widely as a statewide referendum on Scott Walker, given incumbent justice David Prosser's avowed support for the Walker agenda. After the non-response of March 9/10, the election was left as the next opportunity for the movement to land a substantive blow against Walker in the foreseeable future. Furthermore, the dispersion of the weeks-long movement into a myriad of fronts (recalls, boycotts, etc) made the April 5 election that much more important as a way to refocus the movement on a single, shared, unifying goal, a way to recapture the power of mass mobilization.

On April 5 more than 1.5 million Wisconsin voters went to the polls and elected Kloppenborg by a mere 204 votes, or so it seemed. A day later 14,300 previously uncounted votes suddenly appeared in Waukesha County under suspicious circumstances involving Waukesha County Clerk Kathy Nickolaus, a former employee of Prosser. She reported enough missing votes to place the results just barely past the percentage needed to trigger a state-financed recount. Amid the calls for investigation from liberal groups,

FIREFIGHTERS FOR LABOR



Caption goes here.
Orae militatibus eture
et reseque offic te
consequam exerum
veliaturl iili sit.

Photo by Lorem Ipsum

WISCONSIN WORKERS UNITED
AGAINST UNION BUSTING



UNION
MADE

An injury
to one
is an injury
to all

Defend
our
unions!



SOCIALIST
international

the lesson in electoral strategy from Gore v Bush 2000 and the '08 Obama campaigns was totally lost, ie close results will always be vulnerable to right wing electoral theft, and that therefore, an electoral victory *must* be beyond doubt.

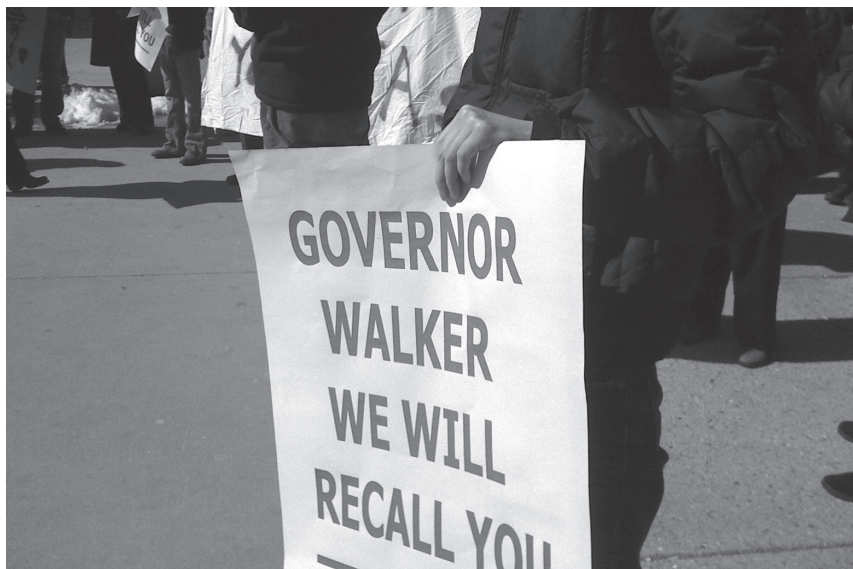
That means mobilizing a massive coalition on the left, including the traditionally under-pollled groups of African American and youth voters. At the time of this writing it does appear that Kloppenburg may have lost fairly, yet what is arguably worse than her defeat is a movement that hedges its bets solely on the polls as the way to defeat one of the most extreme and well-coordinated right wing attacks on working people in modern history, and even then, fails to implement a known winning electoral strategy.

On a larger level, let's imagine, what would have transpired had citizens occupied the senate assembly chambers instead of just the rotunda, especially on the day of the assembly vote? What would have happened had Walker ordered the National Guard (as he threatened to do from the beginning) to quell protests and strikes and the Guard refused? The fact is nobody knows, and that is precisely the point. Once the movement energy and hopes are re-channelled into electoral efforts nearly exclusively, the outcome—no matter who wins, really—is already predetermined and circumscribed by the structure of conventional politics, a structure that favors wealth and has allowed ever increasing inequality to become the norm.

We have now reached the fourth or fifth act of the Wisconsin Uprising. The fundamental contradictions that have shaped the sequence of events—including the key failures of the left that have helped Walker achieve his present position of strength—cannot be resolved without a strategic reorientation. Above all, we need to be *courageously visionary*.

As with any historical advance toward an egalitarian society, our achievements will take time, energy, and commitment for the long haul. But we already knew that. What we've been reminded of in Wisconsin over the last two months, is that once started, following through on the chain of escalations gives us a better chance of winning specific battles and puts our opposition on the defensive, as long as we have the courage, vision, and creativity to increase the pressure when the opportunities present. Strategically speaking, the events in the chain of escalation itself are what generate the spaces of new socialities, the beginnings of the democracy we want, and the ground on which new leaders and new ideas emerge from the grassroots.

Now that the chain has been broken and the conservatives have prevailed for the moment, the question is how to restart a series of meaningfully oppositional actions. Furthermore, let us always remember how these



Caption goes here. Eveliquu ntiberiatias id et eatas ex ex eatur. Qui re pa volorrym idi rem simi, nimet quaspera voluptis veni cuptiae.

such actions can communicate solidarities across sectors and constituencies beyond the union-dominated constitution of the movement, as did the near-spontaneous actions of the first week. In other words, if this movement is to be sustained, it can no longer be exclusively or even primarily about unions, collective bargaining, or the GOP's greed and lies, as egregious as they are. In order to win, we need to imagine and articulate *the society that we want to live in*, not simply fight defensively against the latest round of GOP/corporate attacks. The Wisconsin Uprising must evolve into a movement that speaks to the priorities of immigrants and the inner-city poor, the unorganized private sector workers, the unemployed, and the incarcerated, as loudly as it speaks to the concerns of the unionized. We need to ask what it would take to make this movement truly popular. *We have the power of numbers* but we remain separated by walls of division. The white progressive voices in a relatively privileged place like Madison have a responsibility to use their privilege and power creatively and generously. The Wisconsin Uprising will gain strength by moving towards a long-term coalition of urban and rural constituencies, one that activates and embraces leadership from the peoples who have been hardest hit by the economic crisis—rural farm communities, Native communities, African-American communities, Hispanic communities, the unemployed, and youth from all classes. A first step towards a movement that attracts and keeps *all* constituencies will demand systemic change on the state, national, and world levels:

1. A visionary safety net founded on a universal basic income for all, rich and poor alike, young and old, employed and unemployed.
2. True immigrant justice, i.e. full amnesty for undocumented adults and citizenship for undocumented youth.
3. Full democratic rights for the incarcerated, and an end to the Drug War. Voting eligibility cannot be stripped.
4. The end of corporate tax giveaways and the privatization programs that have destroyed the public sector.
5. Increased public funding for public education, public health care, public transportation, and the arts.
6. Environmental sustainability and water conservation as the foundation for urban and rural planning. Shift towards renewable energy and food justice.
7. A real end to the unnecessary, wasteful, and brutal multi-trillion-dollar wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, drastically reduced military spending, and funding full care for our veterans.
8. The ousting of Gov. Walker and his administration, either through resignation or recall.

* * *

We all know that the budget repair bill is only the beginning of a calculated attack on the middle and lower class. In preparation, we would do well to revisit the movements and campaigns from both the recent and distant past that mixed lobbying, protest, and media work with strikes, occupations, and civil disobedience. These include struggles like the 2008 Republic Windows and Doors factory and the 2010 Whittier Elementary School field house occupations in Chicago, and the Ojibwe fishing rights movement and the campaign that killed the proposed Crandon Mine, both from Wisconsin in the 1990s. Any number of past struggles, such as the Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike of 1968, or the San Francisco General Strike in 1934, or the Flint Sit-Down Strike in 1936-37, still inspire and instruct. As we move forward we need to examine why overly cautious labor leaders and unimaginative Democrats took the reins of a movement that held such promise, and how we let them. In closing, we urge our fellow citizens and activists in the grassroots to reserve our power separately from the “leadership” and prepare for the next uprising, the one that will erupt in a day, a week, a month, or years down the road—the one in which we do not let the opportunity slip away.