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# Wisconsin's Legacy of Labor Battles

By **KATE ZERNIKE**

The protesters who camped out in the Wisconsin Capitol building in Madison for nearly three weeks hung a handwritten placard over the marble bust of Robert La Follette, the state's titan of progressivism.

"What Would Bob Do?" it begged, a plaintive appeal to recall the state's history on the forefront for workers' rights as the protesters try to fend off [Scott Walker](#), the new Republican governor, who insists that he will not compromise in his bid to all but eliminate collective bargaining for public unions.

A particular indignation inflects the chanting of the protesters, who had taken over the Capitol before a judge ordered them to leave Thursday: How could workers' rights be on the line here, of all places — the state that was the first to establish workers' compensation and unemployment insurance, the birthplace of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the giant public employees' union?

But that history tells only part of the story. In Wisconsin, and the Midwest more broadly, there has long existed a tension between those who would expand workers' rights and those who believe that they are the impediment to prosperity. The region has been the model as much for anti-union campaigns as it has been for workers' rights.

And the events in Wisconsin have often had consequences for the rest of the country. For instance, when Wisconsin gave public employees the right to collectively bargain in 1959, the state was on the cutting edge; President John F. Kennedy soon extended the same benefit to federal workers. Ronald Reagan, as governor of California, also gave state employees that benefit.

But Wisconsin was also the first state to rein in the power of unions, the result of a pushback from conservatives who believed that the federal Wagner Act, which required employers in the private sector to recognize and collectively bargain with unions, had been too generous. In 1939, the state passed a bill that presaged the Taft-Hartley Act, the federal law enacted in 1947 that prohibited many strikes and proscribed picketing, and allowed states to pass right-to-work laws against closed union shops.

One of the key authors of that federal legislation was the chief of labor relations at Allis-Chalmers, a Milwaukee-area farm equipment and machine manufacturing company that had fended off an epic strike earlier that year. Now the nation is watching to see which side wins in

the battle between Mr. Walker and the flood of unions, local and national, that has surrounded the Capitol to fight him.

“The play by the governor is part of a longer history and a longer struggle over ideas and social policy,” said Rosemary Feurer, a labor historian at Northern Illinois University. “When I see this I think, history doesn’t repeat itself, but it sure does rhyme.”

In her book, “Radical Unionism in the Midwest, 1900-1950,” Professor Feurer recounts how companies in the electrical industry in St. Louis started a network known as the Metal Trades Association in the first part of the 20th century to fight union organizing. The association had been alarmed by union protests that erupted violently with the Haymarket Square riot in 1886 and the demands for an eight-hour day, which started with the 1894 Pullman strike in Illinois — an early effort by Eugene V. Debs, the former Indiana legislator and future Socialist Party candidate for president.

“That left a legacy of the 1930s and ’40s for employers to form deep right-wing networks,” Professor Feurer said.

That network, she argues, was the precursor to the Midwestern groups that have now been assisting the fight against the unions in Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana: the Bradley Foundation, based in Milwaukee, and Koch Industries, based in Wichita, Kan. David H. and Charles G. Koch, the billionaire brothers behind the energy and manufacturing conglomerate that bears their name, have been large donors to Mr. Walker in Wisconsin, as has their advocacy group, Americans for Prosperity, which first opened an office in Wisconsin in 2005.

“They are surprised by how much people have been galvanized against Walker,” Professor Feurer said, “because they have been so successful in the private sector in breaking the unions and connecting them to the idea that unions and the fight for rights is somehow un-American.”

The ferment in the Midwest — a place that many people on the coasts assume just waits around for revolutionary ideas to be flown in, like day-old sushi — exists in part because the region has been the center of so much of the industry where the union movement first took hold.

“That environment bred very different ideas of political freedom and justice,” said Michael Kazin, a professor of history at Georgetown whose book “The Populist Persuasion” traces the growth of populism both left and right. “On the one hand, there were the business conservatives who believed that their skills and entrepreneurial energy had enabled the country to become rich. On the other hand, the people who worked for them thought they were leeching from them.”

“There’s always been people who think like Scott Walker,” he added, “just as there was Eugene V. Debs and Walter Reuther,” the famous union leaders.

The existence of a strong progressive tradition, particularly in Wisconsin, provoked an inevitable resistance.

“I don’t think there’s a particularly anti-union tradition that doesn’t exist in other states,” said William Powell Jones, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin in Madison who is writing a history of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees and public employee unions. “I think it’s that there’s a progressive, pro-union trend that doesn’t exist elsewhere, and there’s been conflict over that tradition.”

This, in part, is what makes Wisconsin such a swing state in elections. “It’s not that it’s a moderate state,” Professor Jones said. “It’s that there is strength on both sides.”

Those two sides have often been able to co-exist.

Socialist mayors were running Milwaukee at the same time Joseph McCarthy was representing the state in the United States Senate, raging against communism and un-American activities. Michael A. Gordon, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin in Milwaukee, recalled one of those mayors, Frank P. Zeidler, telling him that he and McCarthy had lunch whenever the senator was in town.

But the pendulum began a more permanent swing with the deindustrialization of the Midwest.

When Wisconsin extended collective bargaining to public employee unions in 1959, said Jonathan Kasperek, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin in Waukesha, politicians and the general public considered it an issue of basic fairness. Private workers had the right to do so; it was accepted “as a matter of common sense,” he said, that public workers should, too.

But with many heavy manufacturing plants closed, there are fewer private-sector employees in unions.

The ads that Americans for Prosperity and others are running on television now talk about fairness again, but through a different prism, Professor Kasperek said. “It’s that the state workers aren’t paying their fair share, that they’re given this special privilege that normal workers don’t get.”

Mr. Walker has called this a fight to balance the budget. But with the unions already agreeing to his financial concessions, it looks more like an ideological one.

“This is our moment,” the [governor said in a call with a prankster](#) whom he believed to be David Koch.

The unions, too, recognize that this is a critical moment, which explains the flood of demonstrators coming in from outside the state.

As the Midwest has been a model before, Professor Jones said, “the winning side here will be emboldened elsewhere.”

