

## Prevent the Next Wisconsin: Reframe the Unions

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Yesterday, the voters of Wisconsin sent a warning to Republican Governor Walker and to any other officials who may be tempted to replicate his attack on unions. After a dramatic come-from-behind campaign, the voters have turned against incumbent supreme Court Justice David Prosser, the governor's ally. Recounts and challenges will follow. This extremely close election testifies both to public displeasure with the governor's attack, and to the public's doubts about the value of unions – doubts that have yet to be fully addressed.

Similar battles are coming, quickly, in other states. To prepare for them, we must improve *how the case for unions is framed*. We must offer a narrative that explains the importance of unions in a time of shrinking membership and shrinking union power. Without a stronger narrative, further attacks are inevitable and further losses likely.

### The Conservative Framing of Unions

Conservatives were emboldened to launch their attack because they felt they could frame unions in a way that would isolate them, demonize them, and pit them against everyone else in Wisconsin. Here are some examples of their arguments:

- *“Public sector unions are not negotiating against corporations – they are negotiating against you, the taxpayers.”*
- *“Public sector unions get wages and benefits that nobody else gets, why should you, the non-union worker, subsidize them?”*
- *“Public sector unions are corrupt: they bribe and threaten legislators to get deals that no one can afford and no one would grant on an honest basis”*

All of this involves *framing and narrative*: conservatives have framed public sector workers as lazy, greedy, and entitled – and they framed public sector unions as corrupt and self-serving. This frame is linked to a narrative in which unions are the villains, taxpayers and non-union workers are the victims, Democrats are the co-conspirators, and Republicans are the heroes.

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To *frame*, in politics, means to establish the meaning of something (in this case, unions, but it could be a candidate, an issue, or an event) and to elicit an intense opinion about it, by forging a connection between that thing, and something else that the public already understands and feels strongly about. For example, President Obama’s decision to enforce a no-fly zone in Libya is framed by proponents as an expression of America’s commitment to freedom and self-determination, our own founding narrative. In contrast, opponents of the no-fly zone frame the decision within a narrative of an overreaching, imperial presidency committing us to a conflict we have no stake in and can’t afford. The side that can get their frame to stick controls the public’s reaction to the thing at hand. From an affective standpoint, frames prime a particular emotional response. From a cognitive standpoint, frames promote certain ideas into awareness and suppress others. As George Lakoff has pointed out<sup>2</sup>, once the frame is set, facts really don’t matter much.

The framing used by conservatives in Wisconsin was designed not only to demonize unions (this has been going on for years) but specifically *to drive a wedge between unions and the far larger number of working people who do not belong to a union* and have no reasonable prospect of joining one. It was designed to pit worker against worker. In essence, the public sector workers and their unions are framed as parasites.

This framing was cleverly structured to appeal not just to the conservative base, but to appeal to moderates as well, and even to people who are in some respects liberal or progressive. It even leaves room for angry populists to join in: *“Even if you resent banks and the multinationals that have sent your jobs overseas, you should still oppose public sector unions – because, well, they’re different, and this isn’t about reining in corporations, it’s about laziness and corruption.”*

### **Conservative Framing Didn’t Stick...or Did It?**

Often conservative framing like this wins. But this time, in Wisconsin, the conservative framing didn’t stick, and public support for unions and union workers remained strong. 62% of Wisconsin residents view public sector workers favorably, while only 39% view Governor Walker favorably.<sup>3</sup> Even the conservative Franklin Center found 56% supporting public sector union rights with 32% opposed. National polls by CBS found similar support.

The failure of the conservative framing to stick probably has much to do with overreach and mean-spiritedness, just as when Gingrich shut down the federal government in 1995. Outrage at the attack strengthened support for unions among all demographic groups, and particularly among liberal democrats who showed an 18% jump in those with a “very favorable” view of unions.<sup>4</sup> Their passion is now fueling the grassroots recall campaign.

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example, *Don’t Think of an Elephant*

<sup>3</sup> Conducted on 2-21 by Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, commissioned by AFL-CIO

<sup>4</sup> Pew Research Center 2-21 to 3-1

We should take some comfort from the good judgment of the people of Wisconsin, but let's not take too much comfort: First, the current bump in support takes place against the backdrop of a long term decline in public support for unions. In 2010, public support for unions hit a new low, unequaled since polling began in 1937. Most recently, from 2007 to 2010, the percent of Americans viewing unions in favorable terms slid rapidly from 58 to 41% and now the favorables and unfavorables for unions are roughly equal.

Even in California, a state with a Democratic majority and above average union membership, 42% of voters believe union pensions are “too generous”, compared to 32% “about right” and voters from non-union households are “dead split over whether unions do more harm than good.”<sup>5</sup>

Americans are now deeply ambivalent about unions: those not in unions see unions as helpful for wages and working conditions – but they also see unions as hurting the competitiveness of U.S. companies, reducing the availability of good jobs and the public is evenly split on whether unions hurt workplace productivity.<sup>6</sup> This ambivalence extends to people who are generally liberal or progressive in their politics.

The decline in public support for unions emboldens conservatives to attack. These attacks will continue until unions can raise public support to a point well above current levels. This will require better framing, a better narrative.

### **New Times Call for a New Frame**

It is widely perceived that the primary purpose of unions is to protect and advocate for their members. This perception was a great strength in times past, when unions were everywhere, but it has become a liability today.

In the mid-twentieth century, nearly every working American who was paid by the hour admired and respected unions. 37% of American workers belonged to unions. Those who weren't in unions saw the power of unions to help their members and raise working standards across the economy. They aspired to be in unions and could realistically hope to find a union job. As a result, non-union employees had every reason to feel solidarity with unions. Because unions enjoyed broad public support, conservatives had to be stealthy in their attack and use deceptive framing like “Right to Work” in their attacks.

Today, only 7% of private sector workers are in unions, and the number is falling. As a result, the perception that unions take care of their own, once a strength, has become a weakness. Most American workers have no hope of belonging to a union. They have no hope to attain the job security, wages, and benefits that unions provide. These workers have no real stake in the unions' survival, and so it is all too easy for conservatives to stir resentment among them.

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<sup>5</sup> Field poll, February 28-March 14<sup>th</sup>, reported in San Francisco Chronicle March 17, 2011

<sup>6</sup> Pew Research February 2-7 2011

Time has undermined the union message in another way as well. In times past, the public recognized that unions had a ripple effect, raising wages and standards in many non-union shops. Today, the public at large understands all too clearly that globalization has greatly limited the power of collective bargaining. Yet they are ambivalent about globalization: they see it as unstoppable, and they love how it crushes prices as much as they hate how it crushes wages. The public yearns for an updated narrative from unions that how explains how unions can improve the prospects for workers despite the unstoppable march of globalization.

### **What Can Be Done Now?**

Americans have been energized by events in Wisconsin, and they want to act. The extraordinary energy of the moment can shift the momentum – if the organizing is effective and if the message is properly framed and communicated.

The challenge is clear: Unions must reintroduce themselves to the American public. They must articulate their role in way that shows effective support of all working Americans, within the real and inescapable context of a global economy.

The unions understand and embrace this challenge. Union campaigners point out that public sector unions protect the police, firefighters, teachers, nurses and others who serve and protect us all. Unions have long advocated for better public policy to protect all working Americans, and they provide indispensable fundraising and organizing support for candidates who support America’s workers and stand up to corporate power. Unions are reaching out in solidarity with civil and human rights activists, people of faith, youth and others, to create a broader movement. (For example, the “We are One” campaign organized more than 1200 events nationwide on April 4<sup>th</sup>, the anniversary of Martin Luther King’s assassination.) Even so, many Americans probably have little awareness of these crucial roles that unions play to benefit society at large, and these roles need to be better articulated and communicated more broadly.

Changing this perception requires well-framed communications in multiple areas. Some of these have policy and programmatic implications as well. Good work is underway; it needs to be continued and expanded, with boldness, creativity, and increased resources:

- Reframing unions as advocates of all working Americans, regardless of whether they are members or not.
- Promoting a well-organized and branded policy agenda designed to benefit all working Americans
- Getting a good balance between the defensive story aimed at current fights, and a realistic, longer-term vision of a promising future.
- Articulating a broader theory of change to promote a pro-worker agenda, despite the limits that globalizations has placed on the collective bargaining process.
- Innovating in how “membership” is defined to create a spirit of participation and common purpose among workers who don’t currently work in a union shop.

(Working America leads this type of outreach, with more than 2.5 million members.)

- A well-resourced and professionally executed communications program to bring a new understanding of the role and importance of unions to a broader public, continually and pro-actively, *before* an attack occurs.

If this program is communicated effectively it will bridge the widening rift separating union worker from non-union worker. It will remind workers who are NOT in unions of why unions are important to their well-being, and why they should protect unions. It will ensure that future attempts by conservatives to pit worker against worker will be soundly rejected by the voting public.

### **Why is this Change Necessary?**

Recall elections and court decisions may reverse the outcome in Wisconsin, but the attacks will continue. Fiscal crises will occur, again and again, both real and fabricated. These crises will be used to justify further attacks on middle class jobs, compensation, and essential public services.

Even though most Americans disapprove of the Wisconsin legislation, support for unions will likely resume its decline as union membership continues to fall in the private sector. Conservatives will learn from their tactical errors, and adopt a more disarming tone. Meanwhile, the spectacle of Democratic legislators running for the border plays poorly and will lose its effectiveness. The public wants strong leaders who stand and fight.

Let us prepare now for the next campaign. Unions must be reframed in a way which renews and reinforces the common interests and values that all working Americans share. If not, America will soon reach a tipping point where public support for unions collapses and they become a relic of a fondly-remembered past, when America had a thriving middle class, and upward mobility rewarded those who worked hard and played by the rules. But if we meet this challenge, then workers' rights can become the new "third rail" of American politics. Our goal should be nothing less.

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