

USA: What's This About Again? I Don't Recall... The Walker Recall and the Battles for Wisconsin

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This week people in the United States (and beyond) are rediscovering Wisconsin. After a year of nearly continuous recalls, primaries, campaigning and special elections, June 5th will be the long awaited vote to decide if Scott Walker will remain the governor of Wisconsin for the next two years.

Watching this election brings up a number of complicated questions. What happened to get us to this point? Why is the race so close if the recall campaign was able to over a million signatures for Scott Walker? What happened to the unions, and what is this even about anymore?

I will try to explain here what has happened in the last year, focusing mostly on the recalls, the fate of the labor movement, and the questions that emerge. Reporting on the politics here is intended to show how the formal political world objectively affects our social sense; presenting the political situation is intended to explain its logic, not as an endorsement of the parties or the last year's strategy. I focus on the importance of the trade unions as institutions that will affect the whole class, and the complications that arise in trying to navigate the political world in the absence of a left electoral alternative.

Since You've Been Gone: Politics after the Budget Repair Bill

The mass protests in Wisconsin ended after Scott Walker signed Act 10 ("the Budget Repair Bill") into law on March 12th, 2012. Whatever else may have been possible, trade union officials told their members to go back to work and announced that their main priority would be recalls and elections; others followed suit, and outfits like United Wisconsin mobilized for a strategy to change state politics (with a big P).

The first part of this strategy (from the top) involved trying to halt Act 10 through the judiciary. The key to this was in the spring elections, where a seat on the State Supreme Court would largely decide how the courts would relate to Walker and the Republican legislative majority. Liberal JoAnne Kloppenburg declared a victory in the Supreme Court race, but soon after Waukesha County Clerk Kathy Nickolaus "found" thousands of votes, giving the election to conservative David Prosser. The clear case of voter fraud was not investigated, and soon after Prosser's Supreme Court overturned an order to suspend Act 10 by Circuit Court Judge Maryann Sumi. Prosser's election gave the green light to Walker's austerity agenda from the courts.

The second part was to try and flip the majority in the State Senate. The mid-term elections gave the Assembly a decisive Republican majority, but the Senate was much closer and there existed a possibility to win a Democrat majority through the recalls. After collecting signatures in a number of counties, a recall election was triggered in July 2011, giving two seats to Democrats [\[1\]](#), but not enough to take a majority in the Senate. As a result, Republicans continued to have full control of the state government and aggressively pushed through spending cuts, rollbacks to rights and protections, privatization plans, voter redistricting and ballot access laws.

The third focus of the electoral strategy was of course was the push towards a recall of Scott Walker, which began in November and culminated in over a million signatures on the governor's recall petition. We will return to this in a moment.

In the meantime...Public Sector Unions in Decline

On August 25th, Act 10 went into effect, officially ending automatic dues collection and recognition, turning Wisconsin's public sector into an open shop. Since that time, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that AFSCME's membership statewide has just about been cut in half [2], AFT has lost about a third of their membership, and the Wisconsin Education Association Commission laid off a fraction of their staff.

As this was happening, unions contributed millions of dollars and dedicated many staff to the recalls (the total spent on both sides was about \$30 million), making way for the criticism that that money could have been better used to train union members and organize to keep the unions together. A case in point was over a strike and lock-out at Manitowoc Crane, when union workers there took action against their private employer attempting to bring Act 10 to the private sector [3]. The Wisconsin AFL-CIO was unprepared to support them, especially with so many of their staff dedicated to the recalls [4].

A point that was made by the labor left is that this "all-in" strategy with regard to the recalls has neglected union organizing and shied away from militancy that could have created pressure on the administration directly. It is both alarming and strangely predictable that unions would have opted for a political strategy: after the wave of militancy that brought them into being in the 1960's and 70's, public sector unions became largely lobbying organizations partnered with the Democratic Party with a very limited culture or experience around mobilization. In the face of this crisis, public sector union officials decided to do what they've always done and played politics.



The Democratic Primary for Governor

The Government Accountability Board (GAB) verified the recall signatures in February, authorizing a recall election for Scott Walker to take place in June. At that point, a race began within the Democratic Party to see who would be the candidate to challenge Scott Walker. The two major candidates in the Democratic Primary ended up being Kathleen Falk, Dane County Executive and labor's pick, and Tom Barrett, Mayor of Milwaukee who ran against Walker in 2010. As had been the case over the summer, the Democrats relationship to collective bargaining and the repeal of Walker's austerity cuts were vague or unconvincing, prompting the UW Teaching Assistants' Association (AFT) not to endorse any candidate in the primary [5], a show of dissatisfaction with the candidates and a political statement against the assumed relationship between trade unions and the Democratic Party. In the end, unions committed \$10 million to Falk, who lost to Barrett as the most electable candidate, despite being a figure of neoliberal reforms and union antagonism in Milwaukee.

Why is the election so close?

This brings us to the present, where just about every poll is seeing the election as a dead heat. Through a loophole in Wisconsin's recall procedure, Walker has been allowed to begin fundraising for the recall election since November, when the recall petitions began, giving him a considerable financial advantage. The Democratic National Committee has mostly stayed away from the Wisconsin election [6], leaving the state party to fend for itself while the Republicans have brought in huge national support. Even still, the polls suggest that most voters have already made up their minds, suggesting that in the end whoever can turn out the most voters is going to win. There is of course the fear of more voter fraud, where local people openly discuss the possibility that Walker might just steal the election. In that case, it becomes a matter of challenging the vote count and hoping that Barrett does not just concede.

Part of the question here is, "who's voting for Walker?" Wasn't it just a year ago that there was a historic uprising? And a million recall signatures? Somewhat muted in this last year's news has been the complicated political terrain in Wisconsin. Tensions exist between public and private workers, Madison and the rest of the state, where the right has shifted the blame of the crisis onto public sector workers as the manufacturing sector has declined (or at least the workers have). Walker's campaign has been consistently about job creation and keeping taxes low, which resonate with a sector of the electorate. The Democrats have enabled this largely by avoiding discussion of jobs and proposing to raise taxes to maintain social programs at an increasingly lower quality. As a result, Barrett's campaign has messaged mostly on the unconvincing lines of "I'm Not Scott Walker", since even as Democrats go he tends to be to the right.

This also shows us one of the major issues with the recall: there's widespread interest in getting rid of Scott Walker (over a million signatures), but the success of the recall is tied to a partisan election. This tends to blur the rejection of Walker with the affirmation of Barrett or other Democrats, who do not represent the spirit of the protests a year ago.

What's At Stake in the Wisconsin Election?

The Progressive, which has not been afraid to question the Democrats and recall strategy this last year, wrote an essay asking, "What's At Stake in Wisconsin?", which outlined a number of important large political and symbolic issues that will be decided to a great extent by the results of the recall election [7]. Whether Walker or Barrett wins, there will still be an austerity agenda that will see struggle in the future, but we should take seriously what is on the horizon: an even more confident right-wing ideologue that will bring in right-to-work legislation, privatize public pensions, sell off public lands and press on reactionary social attacks. There is also the question of what lessons hundreds of thousands of people will take with them after this election—will a Walker victory convince people that nothing can change? Will a Barrett victory demobilize?

While the focus has been on the gubernatorial race, a final senate recall will also be on this ballot, opening the possibility of a Democratic majority there.

Where do we go from here?

This election will bring up a number of issues Wisconsinites will have to consider in moving forward. First, on the elections themselves, the sheer money-power, fraud and access problems suggest the need for some democratic reforms. It should also bring up a radical question: when this many people clearly say that the government's actions are unacceptable and they're unable to do anything about it, how democratic can the state really be? Wisconsin's progressive past and traditions, in large part influenced by German socialist immigrants, starts to make some interesting comparisons. It will be particularly difficult to challenge for partisan office in a Citizens United world with decimated workers' organizations, but some experimentation with electoral activity should be considered.

Second, no matter whether or not Act 10 is repealed and unions have their rights restored, at this point the damage is done. Chances are that the public sector will continue to operate in an open shop environment, which says that if they want to have recognition and power as unions, they will need to change the way they work to become solidarity and struggle based unions.

Lastly, it has not been sufficiently covered in this piece but there is excellent organizing in the state around various issues that affect workers in different ways: housing, unemployment, transportation, etc. Wisconsin's left activists began a very interesting experiment in developing militant, grassroots coalitions of groups to fight with common cause. These formations have great promise and have in them the potential to build great social solidarities.

Andrew Sernatinger, June 5, 2012

P.S.

* From Solidarity website:

<http://www.solidarity-us.org/site/node/3624>

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Footnotes

[1] See on ESSF (article 25449), [USA: Wisconsin Recalls Take Two, Needed Three](#).

[2] <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702304821304577436462413999718.html>

[3] See on ESSF (article 25450), [USA: Wisconsin Crane Strike Crumples](#).

[4] <http://www.eiaonline.com/intercepts/2011/08/16/waiting-for-more-weaction/>

[5] <http://www.thedailypage.com/daily/article.php?article=36260>

[6] http://www.progressive.org/dnc_betray_wisconsin.html

[7] Available on ESSF (article 25451), [USA: What's at Stake in Wisconsin](#).