Review

A Wisconsin Idea Resurgent

Friday 4 May 2012, by RUFF Allen (Date first published: 1 May 2012).

Reviews: *It Started In Wisconsin. Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Labor Protest*. By Mari Jo Buhle & Paul Buhle, editors. London & New York: Verso,. 2011, 181 pages,. $14.95 paperback.

***Wisconsin Uprising. Labor Fights Back*. By Michael D. Yates. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2011,. 304 pages, $18.95 paperback.**

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MORE THAN A year has passed since the mass protests of February-March 2011, at Madison and elsewhere across Wisconsin, erupted in response to Republican Governor Scott Walker's effort to bust the state's public employee unions. The three-week occupation of the State Capitol building and truly massive outdoor demos in the surrounding streets drew the attention of the entire country and much of the world.

Ongoing rallies, with crowds sometimes numbering well over a hundred thousand, drew organized labor and the unorganized, private and public sector workers, high school and college kids, farmers, the elderly and the young, retirees, the unemployed and recently returned veterans, and whole families with kids and grandkids — from every city, town and county in the state.

The Walker Offensive

Following a bogus campaign promise to create "jobs, jobs, jobs!" newly elected Walker announced at the beginning of his November 2010 victory speech that "Wisconsin is open for business!"

Even before taking office, Walker succeeded in killing an $800 million federal grant for a high-speed rail line connecting Madison and Milwaukee, a move that cost the state an estimated $100 million in preexisting agreements.

Barely mentioned as the February protests grew, the new administration's offensive came on the

heels of a retrenchment imposed upon state employees, in the form of further concessions and unpaid “furlough days” mandated by the preceding governor, Democrat Jim Doyle.

When word of what was contained in Walker’s “budget repair bill” spread in mid-February, a largely spontaneous protest rapidly grew. What eventually came to be viewed primarily as an outright attempt to destroy public sector unionism, Walker’s proposal also threatened numerous drastic cuts or an end to remaining social services including “Badgercare,” the state-wide equivalent to Medicare, assistance to the elderly, the disabled, poor families and children in need.

The bill promised decreased funding for public education. Masked by the rhetoric of “deficit reduction,” it also sought to restructure or eliminate and privatize a number of state agencies, to remove them from civil service oversight by placing them directly under control of governor-appointed boards or panels.

The “repair bill” proposed privatizing assets such as state-owned power plants, and called for ending the limits on the allowable levels of environmentally damaging agricultural phosphates — a bone to large agribusiness. Aspects of the bill, ostensibly a needed “belt tightening” induced by state deficits and the Great Recession, threatened to place additional fiscal pressures and new burdens on already strained counties and municipalities statewide.

Coming on the heels of tax breaks for the wealthiest families and corporations, the proposal also demanded new rounds of concessions from all public employees, with the exception of fire fighters and police.

Every item of the Walker agenda fueled the popular outrage. Largely unanticipated and unimaginable beforehand, the popular response made history.

New Populism in the Streets

That outpouring in opposition to the Walker agenda immediately birthed a torrent of descriptive accounts and commentary, much of it centered on a central question, “Why Wisconsin?”

Two recently released collections — *It Started in Wisconsin* compiled by the Madison-based historians Paul and Mari Jo Buhle, and *Wisconsin Uprising. Labor Fights Back* edited by the working-class journalist, Michael Yates — have offered up a number of important perspectives and insights in response to that question and much more. Collectively, both convey some deeper understandings and offer important lessons valuable for struggles to come. Both will stand as future reference points for those wishing to get some later handle on what happened in the “Badger State.”

The Buhles’ collection, subtitled “Dispatches from the Front Lines of the New Labor Protest,” is largely that — a populist mix of eyewitness accounts spiced with photos and comix drawn by Wisconsin artists and scripted by Paul Buhle.

Several of the book’s portraits certainly convey some approximate sense of the spirit, excitement and exhilaration experienced by the hundreds of thousands who filled the streets around the State Capitol through those wintry weeks. The all-too-brief first hand accounts by trade union activist David Poklinkowski and grad student organizer Charity Schmidt leave the reader with a desire for more, either from both of them or from other activists at the epicenter of the upsurge.

Importantly, several of the key essays provide a deeper backdrop for an understanding of what happened. The massive show of solidarity with those directly affected by the “budget repair bill” did

not come just from police and firefighters exempted from the assault, or from private sector trade union hands. It came from a broader public not directly tied to organized labor.

For many of those who took to the streets, a majority of whom had never marched or demonstrated before, the fundamental issue was that open attack on basic democratic rights. Their outpouring reflected what can only be described as a deep-seated generations-old Wisconsin political culture, described by Mari Jo Buhle in her essay on the "Wisconsin Idea."

At its deepest level, the Walker assault was widely viewed as an attempt to dismantle that 100-year-old progressive tradition of a positive interventionist state, the taproot expectation of social protections, and "clean" transparent government. After all, during the "Progressive Era" Wisconsin led the country with the passage of a raft of social and political legislation, primarily protections against corporate abuse and government corruption.

The "Dairy State" led the way with worker's compensation and restrictions on child labor, food safety and environmental legislation. Wisconsin's progressives created a whole set of regulatory bodies and civil service agencies as safeguards against corporate abuse and political corruption. It was the first state to pass the recall.

In short, the "Idea" as it came to be embodied in the simple notion that the State Capitol and the University of Wisconsin, sitting at the opposite ends of Madison's State Street, would work hand-in-hand to serve the people of the state. The threats to all of that played an important, though rarely articulated, role in mobilizing the vast numbers of protesters.

Developments in Wisconsin did not occur in a vacuum, of course. Writing on the corrupting influence of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), Mary Botari from Madison's Center for Media and Democracy places the Walker onslaught in a broader context of the more generalized national right-wing offensive.

Madison local Ruth Conniff, the *Progressive* magazine's political columnist, made similar connections in her piece on "school reform" privatization efforts snaking their way through committees headed by Republicans grafted to well-suited charter school execs and lobbyists.

It Started in Wisconsin also contains several important perspectives on the state of Wisconsin labor, key for understanding the uprising. Paul Buhle and Frank Emspak, director of the Madison-based Workers' Independent News Service (WINS) labor radio digest, remind us that the state has had its own history of public sector labor militancy, initially centered on struggles over the right to organize among civil service employees and teachers.

The Madison area in particular, as the state capital and home of the University of Wisconsin system's main campus, provided large numbers of AFSCME, AFT, and WEAC (Wisconsin Education Association Council/NEA) rank and filers to the fray.

Racine, WI labor journalist Roger Bybee's overview of capital's decades-long war of attrition on the state's industrial workers — the dismantling of what had been the manufacturing heartland of eastern Wisconsin, the resultant decline of union density, but also the lessons learned in various "fight backs" — tells us much about the "hard hat" presence among the Madison crowds.

Labor Fights Back

Complementing the Buhles' collection, the Yates book offers up an additional set of takes on the

“uprising.” Several pieces stand out, among them the lead essays by younger activist-participants Connor Donegan and Andrew Sernatinger.

Both convey a real sense of the dynamic and fluid nature of the movement in its early stages, while placing the Madison events in the context of the post-2008 recession — the deepening fiscal crisis of the state at a time of increasing demands for already scaled-back social services and relief, and a “second wave” of imposed austerity in the form of budget cuts and retrenchment following close on the heels of tax cuts for in-state corporations and the rich.

With the Republican 2010 ascendancy in the state, Wisconsin’s popular classes rapidly became the target of what Donegan insightfully described as a “domestic structural adjustment program,” an imposed austerity on the vulnerable.

That well-coordinated economic offensive, not unique to Wisconsin, was also ideological and political in nature as Walker and his conservative allies elsewhere looked to take advantage of the protracted downturn — not only to savage public sector unionism, but to extract whatever they could from the subordinate classes as a whole.

Disputing the severity of Wisconsin’s impending fiscal crisis and the necessity of Walker’s “budget repair bill,” various observers accurately described the assault on the unions as a political offensive intent on crippling labor’s “war chest” of support for the Democrats, to assure ongoing Republican ascendancy in an age of unrestrained campaign contributions.

The socialist labor reporter Lee Sustar’s description of the Wisconsin workers’ movement — his portrait of the different currents within the unions, the effects of the ongoing recession on labor, the longer context of bipartisan assaults on public and private sector unionism, the reminder that the assault on state employees had begun under Democrat Jim Doyle’s administration — provides a way of understanding the often contrasting roles that union rank-and-filers and an officialdom wedded to the Democrats played in the upsurge.

Quite valuable as well is the overview survey, the chronology of the mobilization captured by Frank Emspak. While others have given us accounts of what happened, not always accurate, his comes closest to getting it right.

The succeeding contributions to the Yates book, written primarily by experienced labor observers, some of whom visited Madison at the height of the uprising, have their place and certainly contain valuable insights, wisdom and vision.

The pieces by Jane Slaughter and Mark Brenner, Stephanie Luce, Michael Hurley and Sam Gindin among others, pose bigger important questions about the significance of those Wisconsin weeks and their meaning for the rest of the country.

Mobilization and Limitations

A year down the road, how do we assess what happened and what can be drawn from the experience? On one hand is the mass spontaneous creativity, marvelously visible in the signs and slogans and the capacity for self-organization inside the state house and out, speaking volumes to the idea that “another world is possible.”

At the same time, the social composition of the movement — the diversity of interests, ideologies and consciousness, as well as the politics and practice, the historical experience of the various actors in

the field — shaped the possible. It defined the strengths and weaknesses, the capacities and limitations on the kinds of political and social pressure needed to turn back the Republican class war offensive.

The initial phase of the upsurge, propelled by the University of Wisconsin's Teaching Assistants' Association, Madison public school teachers and their students, a diverse mix of rank-and-file unionists and assorted Madison activists, caught the union leadership and Democratic Party off guard. The spontaneity of the mass, the rank-and-file motion of an incensed public, outdistanced and by-passed the established "leadership."

That mass outpouring actually pushed the union leadership beyond its established "comfort zone." (Some AFSCME and Wisconsin Education Association Council [WEAC] leaders actually called for "lobbying days" when the "repair bill" was first announced!) The presence of the crowds jam-packed into the capitol soon created the political space for fourteen Democratic state senators to leave the state and deny the quorum needed for passage of the "repair bill."

The crowd again took the lead, reoccupying the Capitol when the Walkerites attempted to rush through a passage of the bill, stripped of its non-economic measures (so that the Democrats' absence couldn't block the proceedings).

Then, as that initial spontaneity of the movement peaked, those best positioned to capitalize on the situation, the most organized forces in the field — the Democratic Party and trade union bureaucracy allied with it — succeeded in containing and channeling, and then demobilizing the upsurge. The majority of those in motion gravitated toward that leadership's liberal message and reserved tactical outlook, constrained by history, past practice, immediate interest and a narrowly defined conception of "politics."

While various conscious elements within the South Central Federation of Labor (the regional labor council, SCFL), and others including organizers from the National Nurses Union (NNU) and assorted left groups — Solidarity, International Socialist Organization, Socialist Alternative and the local IWW branch among them — put forward working-class politics and slogans, they lacked the strength in numbers, organizational capacities, funding or unity to challenge the politics and ideology put forward by the trade union-Democrat alliance.

In the absence of anything resembling a left bloc as a contending pole, the majority of demonstrators moved toward recall efforts and away from direct action.

People came to the streets with their own sets of individual and collective concerns, interests, grievances and understandings. They also came equipped with varied experiences, practices and perceptions that shaped the contours of protest.

The trade unions, already under decades-long attack, came to the field largely ill prepared. The leadership and most of the rank-and-file entered the fray following decades during which collective skills and popular memories of mass action and "struggle unionism" had atrophied.

Long wedded to a "service model" of business unionism, resting upon a largely inactive and demobilized rank-and-file base and increasingly defensive concessionary practices, the union response remained limited. That situation was compounded by a narrow conception of "political action" defined primarily as economic and electoral support for the Democratic Party.

The call to "kill the bill," initially the demand of the movement from below, became the main slogan of the union leadership and rank-and-file, with their understandable focus on the immensely significant but nevertheless narrow concern to preserve collective bargaining and automatic dues

checkoff.

That narrower focus largely ignored or sidelined whole tiers of the working class threatened by other aspects of the bill: the unemployed and underemployed, immigrant workers, part-time and temp workers, communities of color, students, the poor and dispossessed and the elderly with or without pensions.

While all of these were threatened, the union leadership, allied politicians and friendly media trumpeted the line that Walker's offensive was "an attack on the middle class." That trope certainly rang true in part, especially among those now under siege who had come to believe the promise of living in a "middle-class society." For others, frankly, "middle class" had also become a code for "white."

In response, the socialist and labor left, few in numbers and lacking a mass base, put forward "kill the whole bill" as a counter slogan, while others on the left, primarily the IWW, disparate anarchists and a small minority within the SCFL, raised the call for a "general strike." This remained a hope rather than a possibility, which failed to consider the actual correlation of forces and collective consciousness in the streets.

Diverse Consciousness

For some people, the demonstrations, largely spontaneous at the onset, signaled a long hoped-for beginning of a fightback against decades of attacks on working class living standards, and a long-awaited resurgence of the labor movement. Others took to the streets genuinely incensed over the perceived disregard for fundamental democratic norms and procedures, the arrogant abuse of power by the newly inaugurated governor, his state house lieutenants and their corporate bosses.

The question of consciousness remained paramount. Ideologically dominant was the belief in the viable functioning of the political process, the possibility of reform. Through that lens, Walker and his associates appeared aberrational as anti-democratic usurpers, a crew of hijackers to be exorcised so that business as usual could return.

That outlook was omnipresent in the signs and populist slogans demanding we "take back" this or that — the statehouse, the governorship, the legislature, etc. It fueled subsequent recall petition drives. Key as well was the deference to authority — to identifiable union leaders and "movement celebrities" (such as Jesse Jackson, Michael Moore, Richard Trumka and other national figures), elected Democratic officials, the police, and self-appointed marshals coming primarily out of the labor movement.

The upsurge in this regard displayed the limits of liberalism in its deference to the legal system, the courts, and electoralism. Another ideological lynchpin was a type of middle class moralism, the issue of good-versus-evil typified by the refrain of "Shame! Shame!" from the assembled crowds. As if the evil Walker and his crew, good Christians that they are, could be shamed into reforming their errant ways!

Analysis rarely went beyond the immediate problem of the Republican administration, of Walker and his cronies, of government by cabal, a conspiratorial clique to be exorcized so that state could return to "normal." While an anti-corporate rhetoric often permeated the events and chants to "tax the rich" raised by the left could often be heard, speakers from the Democratic and labor-dominated rally platforms rarely if ever placed the Walker offensive in a broader context.

Critical voices raised questions about “the deficit” and tax breaks for the rich, but there was little discussion regarding the generalized national and international austerity offensive and the causes of the Great Recession. Greed and corruption, rather than capital, were trumpeted as the core issues.

Demonstrations continued constantly at the capitol, and planned weekend marches continually grew larger during the first month. While the demonstrations remained non-violent, importantly so, some in the crowds lost the distinction between “pacifism” and “passivity.” Despite the presence of respectable numbers of activist youth and experienced “movement veterans,” the movement was heavily restrained in its ability to plan and undertake direct action or mass civil disobedience.

Mass mobilizations, upsurges, have their limits. At some level they become unsustainable, especially in the absence of mass organization in a political culture unaccustomed to protracted struggle. Still, relinquishing the Capitol rotunda, the ending of the occupation, was an error at the time it occurred.

The left inside the building did not fully understand its symbolic importance as a rallying point, organizing and communications hub, and center of movement visibility when a self-anointed “leadership” of Democratic underlings and labor elements moved to clear the building in cooperation with the authorities. Ill-prepared, left elements failed to assess the situation or to counter the arguments of those wanting the building emptied.

Best of Times, Worst of Times…

If the past is prologue, then the appraisals of last year’s Wisconsin events must remain mixed and tentative. The mass mobilizations of February and March 2011 and subsequent court actions initially delayed the passage of the “budget repair bill” assault. Walker and his supporters soon had their way, however, in crippling the public employees’ unions and in furthering a broader agenda of economic assaults on numerous fronts.

Recall efforts and resultant elections against five Republican Senators, which the Democrats and their labor allies hoped would shift the balance of power in the legislature, came up short as the Walkerites held on to their majority in the upper house. New legislation, focused on further privatizing the political and social patrimony of the state, continued to win approval.

At the same time, some 30,000 petitioners collected over a million signatures in the opening round of a recall effort aimed at Walker and his lieutenant governor. That special election has now been scheduled for June 2012. It remains unclear whether the recall will succeed, especially since the list of potential Democratic contenders at this point is far from reassuring.

Fortunately, the implementation of “voter ID” legislation, passed in the spring, has been placed on hold by court rulings until after early April’s in-state general elections. That marked a victory, since the new law would have disenfranchised large numbers of students, people of color and the elderly.

A measure to open up vast acreage in the state’s northlands to strip mining interests, pushed as a “job creator,” also went down to defeat (but only after a key Republican withheld support). It seems for the moment as if the Republican juggernaut had stalled.

The past year witnessed the best of times and the worst of times. While the movement to halt the conservative onslaught fell far short, last winter’s mobilizations, trailing off as spring approached, nevertheless brought hundreds of thousands into motion for the first time.

The rallies and occupations, marches and subsequent town meeting forums, and later recall

campaigns across the state acted as political schools and social laboratories for collective action. New seeds were planted in the popular memory. Germinating quietly just below the surface of the Wisconsin heartland, they'll grow. New hybrids will arise.

Allen Ruff

P.S.

* Against the Current 158, May/June 2012. http://www.solidarity-us.org/