

This Is What Democracy Looks Like!

Two Weeks in Madison

by Gary L. Johnson
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The last two weeks in Madison have been absolutely amazing! You may have seen pictures or news stories, but they can't possibly capture the magic and magnitude of the event. I want to share with you my personal experiences and try to give you a little flavor of what it has been like. Pictures and video are nice, but I think there are times when only words can come close conveying a feeling. Please send this to anyone you think may be interested. News stories are always brief and not always accurate, and I think it is important for EVERYONE to know what has and is transpiring here. Each section is headed by some of my favorites of the thousands of signs that have decorated our beautiful capitol. Some are funny, some are clever, some are heart wrenching, some are a little risqué, some are very thought provoking and eloquent; but all of them are wonderful!

"It's all about the collective bargaining, stupid."

"When you say fiscal responsibility it seems you really mean rich people keeping their money."

"What's disgusting? Union busting!"

"How can a guy who turned down federal funding for high speed trains like railroading so much?"

*“My State Senator is representing
my best interests by being in Illinois.”*

First, let me provide some background to what has happened in Wisconsin. Our three term Democratic governor chose not to run for reelection and the office was won by Republican Scott Walker. In addition, both houses of the legislature have a Republican majority, and many of them are hard-core right wing ideologues. They aren't your father's Republicans. The voter turnout was lower than 2008, particularly in areas that favored Democratic candidates. We were expecting a difficult couple of years, but nothing like this. On Friday, February 11th, Governor Walker announced a so-called 'Budget Repair Bill' to correct a short fall in the just ending budget. There would be hearings on the bill on the following Monday and Walker wanted it voted upon by the end of the week. When people read the bill, they were dumbfounded. It proposed to cover the shortfall by forcing public employees to permanently increase their share of health insurance costs and payments into their retirement fund regardless of contractual language. The budget shortfall was to be made up by public employees. However, that was just the beginning. It also prohibited public employees from bargaining for anything other than base pay, and base pay increases were capped by the cost of living. That meant no bargaining of the salary schedule, working hours conditions, sick leave, or anything else.

Governor Walker said this was necessary, because the state was broke and so there was no point in bargaining. He said that public employees could recoup some of the financial hit by not paying union dues, since bargaining was not going to happen anyway. Unions could still exist, but they would have to recertify EVERY YEAR. It is a blatant attempt to bust the public unions. He exempted police and firefighters, because the largest police unions backed his campaign and everyone loves firefighters. There are many other really scary things in this bill that would give Governor Walker unprecedented powers that he could use with no oversight whatsoever. If you want to read it, go to the State of Wisconsin web site.

Hearings began late Monday morning. The Republicans, who knew the details of the bill before the Democrats or the public at large, had arranged to bus in people to support the bill, gave them preferential seating in the hearing room, and allowed them to testify immediately since they had "come so far" to participate. People who opposed the bill had to sign up on a list and wait for their turn to testify. There were thousands of people. The hearing continued until 3 am when the Republicans decided they had heard enough and, having the majority, adjourned the hearing while hundreds still waited to testify. The Democrats remained and continued to allow

testimony. In fact, Democratic legislators took turns sitting in as the testimony continued around the clock for days. The Finance Committee met the next day (while the public continued to testify) and sent the bill on intact to the Senate.

The Senate was scheduled to 'debate' the bill on Tuesday with the plan being to bring it to a vote by the end of the day. The Senate is comprised of 33 members; 19 Republicans and 14 Democrats. Budget bills require a quorum of 20 members. When the Democratic Senators realized that this bill would be pushed through with very little meaningful discussion, they left the state and are staying in Illinois. Without them a quorum was not available and the bill could not be passed. They remain out of state at this time. Their drastic action essentially ground the process to a halt and has allowed this remarkable event to take place. The Republican head of the Senate has had the Wisconsin State Patrol harassing the families of Democratic Senators, going to their churches on Sunday looking for them, etc. Did I mention that the newly appointed head of the Wisconsin State Patrol is the father of the Republican head of the Senate? Did I mention that the Republican head of the Assembly and the Republican head of the Senate are brothers?

"Wisconsin - The Pack, cheese, brats, beer, UNIONS!"

"Dear Wisconsin, thanks for standing up for my family."

"Never been so proud to be a Wisconsinite!"

"Working class kicking ass."

"Justice will prevail."

[under a picture of Obi Wan Kenobi:]

"If you bust the unions we shall become more powerful than you can possibly imagine."

“One day longer”

It is right and fitting that this struggle should be taking place in Wisconsin. Wisconsin has always been an important state for organized labor. It was the first state to offer workmen's compensation and unemployment compensation. One of the nation's largest public employee unions, the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) grew from the Wisconsin labor movement 75 years ago. Both our public sector unions and our private sector unions have strong traditions. Wisconsin has always stood up for working families and the middle class. This brazen attempt to take away bargaining rights goes against everything Wisconsin has stood for over the past century. If you're looking for a fight with organized labor, you'll get one in Wisconsin. I'm not sure if we will win this battle, but my experiences over the past two weeks tells me labor is awakened, unified, and energized as it has never been in my lifetime for the many battles ahead. However long they last, we will last one day longer.

“One nation, one Union”

“An injury to one is an injury to all.”

“Outside agitators welcome”

The coming together of union workers in Wisconsin and the support and encouragement we have received from our union brothers and sisters across the nation and from abroad have been amazing. We are all brothers and sisters in Madison. I see people working in solidarity and unity of purpose that you wouldn't expect to even speak to each other - high school students, corrections officers, college students, pipe fitters, nurses, steel workers, child care workers, teachers, truck drivers. We are one.

I have never seen the kind of solidarity across the spectrum that I have experienced these past two weeks. I can't possibly portray how exhilarating it is! As I

mentioned, in a calculated move of political expediency the governor exempted firefighters and police officers from this bill, but they know it is only a matter of time until he comes for them. Every day 200-300 firefighters from across the state amass at Madison Fire Station #1 three blocks away and march to the Capitol behind their drums and bagpipes. The crowd parts like the Red Sea to allow them passage into and through the Capitol. Everyone loves the firefighters! Usually close behind are the 'Cops for Labor' - a contingent of off-duty officers from Madison and surrounding communities. Often there are officers who may have had Capitol security detail the day before. One of the first days of the protest I talked with a member of the Capitol Police who ordinarily cover security for the Capitol. He said he has to keep his opinions to himself, and then leaned in close to say softly, "But this is really great!" They have their job to do, but they are with us. There are signs and banners all over the walls and railings inside the Capitol showing support from all across the country - Boston, Chicago, Detroit, New York City, Los Angeles, Pittsburgh, and many more. A woman drove to Madison from Maine last week to buy us coffee. We received a long letter from the head of the labor unions in Egypt praising our actions.

This is truly what unions are all about. And it is not just union people here, either. I talked with a non-union carpenter who told me that to get work he has to price himself a bit below the union rates. If the pay of union carpenters goes down so does his pay. As nice as all the outside support is, 95% of the protesters here live in Wisconsin. Our Governor wants people to think the protests are orchestrated and staffed by 'outside agitators'. They aren't. In fact, initially these protests weren't organized by anyone; they were quite spontaneous. The organization that now exists has evolved over time.

"Tell me what democracy looks like."

"THIS IS WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE!!"

"Woody Guthrie is smiling down on us."

"Where is Pete Seeger?"

Of all the chants that rise up from the crowds, that's my favorite. 'This IS what democracy looks like! We chant or sing all day long, inside or outside. For those staying in the Capitol the day begins and ends with the Star Spangled Banner. We are reclaiming the flag and our national anthem from those who have usurped them but do not honor what they represent. We sing patriotic songs, union songs, folk songs, civil rights songs, Bob Marley songs. There are guitars, drums, tubas (this is Wisconsin, after all), and bagpipes when the firefighters march through each day. We sing with Peter Yarrow of Peter, Paul & Mary. We chant about the Union, about the bill, about freedom and rights. We are loud, and we are proud. The noise level in the capitol, where everything reverberates, is incredible. We could be heard at some of the governor's televised press conferences even though he was sealed in his inner sanctum two floors up.

***"To the Tea Partiers - Ignorance is Strength –
1984 by George Orwell - Read it!"***

***"This is Wisconsin. We don't
have tea parties; we have keggers."***

There have been some who have showed up at the Capitol in support of Governor Walker. They have been bussed in for the most part, stay an hour or two, and leave. There were perhaps 1500 or so on Saturday, February 19th and somewhat fewer the next Saturday. They were, of course, the focus of the Fox News folks, who were happy to have something they could actually use in their typical 'fair and balanced' reporting. When there weren't counter protesters present, the main focus of Fox News seemed to be trying to get someone to say or do something stupid. I heard they had heavy coverage of someone sneaking into the Assembly chamber to illustrate the unruly mob that was rioting in Madison. There have been some heated exchanges that have taken place, but no violence of any kind (more on that later). But I know there are Walker supporters out there. I just can't figure them out. I think I probably talked to almost as many people protesting who had voted for Governor Walker and were regretting it as there were counter protesters. I was picketing around the Capitol one day this week when a woman came out, stopped, and stared in my direction. I thought she wanted to read my sign (I'm a little wordy sometimes). She said she was just looking at the two large semi trailers that the AFL-CIO had brought in that day. I said, "Yeah, pretty impressive." She said, "Why don't all those people from out of state go home. This is none of their business!" I said, "Actually, it IS

their business.” She covered her ears, shouted, “Leave me alone!” and scurried away. Truth can be inconvenient sometimes.

Rule #1 - “This is OUR house! Keep it clean.”

“Hello! Welcome to the democratic process!

Make your voice heard, meet some new friends,

and please pick up after yourself.

Let’s keep our capitol beautiful!”

When you enter the Capitol there are four simple rules that have been posted by the people. Rule One is “This is OUR house. Keep it clean.” If you have read articles (and I have seen them by the Associated Press) about how the Capitol is a mess, don’t believe it. Yes, the floors are very dirty - that happens when you have anywhere between 10,000 and 100,00 people going through it each day. And, yes, there is bedding piled up (usually in out of the way alcoves) that people who stay the night use. Other than that it is very well cared for. There are posters all over on most of the pillars and walls on the first three floors. Virtually all of them are attached with blue ‘painter’s tape’ which leaves no residue when it is removed. Other types of tape are not allowed (by the people, not the police). There are volunteers constantly patrolling to pick up trash or recyclables. As trash bags fill they are removed and new bags put in place. On any parts of the building not in clear view (bathrooms, for example) we have large signs (our signs) warning people not to tag or deface any surface in the building.

In two weeks I have not seen one instance of damage or graffiti. Protesters have developed quite an organization scheme inside the Capitol. There are food stations, a medical area staffed by nurses, a family area that is a bit quieter and has coloring books and toys for the kids, and an information area. When there were lots of Madison teachers and students in the house there was a study area for students and a paper grading area for teachers. If students had a homework question they could go to the teacher area and get some help. When a need arises, it is met. It has all been a very organic and responsive process.

Rule #2 - "Nonviolence"

Rule # 3 - "No drugs or alcohol"

"This is the most polite riot I've ever been to! Thank you!"

"This is my 4th day of rioting, and there isn't a scratch on me!"

*"Union thug drummers love Wisconsin."
sign on a 6 year old girl "Union Thug"*

Our Governor (and, of course, Fox News) has been trying to portray us as 'union thugs' who are a danger to the public. Honestly, I never would have believed you could have crowds ranging from 10,000 to over 100,00 people behaving so well. I have been polite so long I am beginning to feel Canadian. Yes, we are angry. But we are also committed to conducting our protest in a civil and nonviolent manner. One of the most common chants - for the firefighters, for the 'cops for labor', for speakers and guests - is "Thank you! Thank you!" This has been a family event. There are kids of all ages there whose parents have brought them to the Capitol to share in the experience. The only danger posed to us was evidently from Governor Walker, who admitted in a prank phone conversation that he had "thought about" planting provocateurs in the crowd to instigate violence, but decided it might backfire. I think it is interesting that he didn't decide it would be a bad thing to do, just that it might not work. We look out for each other.

I was in the hallway outside the Governor's office one day with a small crowd of people. The Governor was evidently in as there was a significant police presence and several camera crews were there. No one was making any noise (very unusual), so I assumed that the officers had told people they could stay there only if they remained quiet. As I was standing there a college-age young man came up the stairs yelling and banging on a bongo drum and started to work his way through the group. I could see the officers begin to stiffen and was about to block the young man when the guy next to me, a corrections officer, beat me to it. He put his arm around the young man and drew him in close for a friendly discussion. After about two minutes of quiet talk they

hugged and the young man quietly headed back down the stairs. I told the corrections officer he must be damn good at his job. He said he saw the officers stiffen and didn't want anyone to get into trouble.

Rule #4 - "Keep the noise down after 11 pm."

"Please forward my mail to the Capitol."

"Where is the laundry and what time is breakfast?"

We have had a 24/7 presence in the capitol for over two weeks. Anywhere from 200 to 600 people spend the night. There are bedrolls, air mattresses, sleeping bags, blankets, and pillows. There is a ritual that has developed. Unless the legislature is in session the drum beats and chants end about 10:30 pm and people begin to head off to 'bed'. Where bed is varies from night to night depending on what floors or hallways might be off limits for one reason or another. The lights remain on all night, but some areas are not brightly lit. As people settle in for the night there are volunteers that go around to collect trash, distribute water, and generally check to make sure everyone is okay. A murmur of conversation continues until about 1 am until everyone tires out. The police patrol all night long, so if you are a light sleeper you are awakened several times during the night by their footsteps. A little before 8 am, when the Capitol officially 'opens', volunteers come around to wake everyone up and another day begins. Breakfast items come in as soon as the Capitol opens and we are off and running. Some of the younger folks have been there every night; I have stayed two nights. It is NOT comfortable; the marble floors are hard and quite cold.

"Officers stand with activists; Activists stand for them."

Our policy of nonviolence and civilized behavior extends most especially to the wonderful police officers brought in from all over the state to provide security. They are our best friends. When they first come in they are amazed at what they find. The riot gear is immediately stashed in the basement and they settle in. They walk around and take in all the posters. They chat with us and keep us informed about their rules. If they are instructed to close off stairways or hallways they will give us notice and

plenty of time to relocate things that need to be moved. We make sure they have water and food if they need it. I talked this week with an officer from a community just north of Milwaukee. It was his second day in Madison. He had called his wife after his first day to check in and she said she was relieved to hear from him as she had been worried about him. He said, "I told her I was treated better here than I would be on a shift back home!" We had game wardens on duty now and then; not exactly their normal role. I asked one guy if he had caught any poachers. He smiled and said he probably better not say what he was thinking. When I was there last Sunday someone had brought in boxes of inexpensive greeting cards and people were busy writing short notes of thanks to be distributed to the police. When the decision was made by the legislature to clear the Capitol on Sunday, February 27th, the police informed everyone of their options and how passive resistance would be handled. Some clearly weren't happy about closing us out. It turned out that there were several hundred people that refused to leave on Sunday; and the Capitol police locked the doors to prevent further entry, but declined to forcibly remove those still inside. As things stand today, a handful of protestors remain inside while the rest of the public is locked out of our own Capitol in violation of the Constitution of the State of Wisconsin. The Dane County Sheriff has stated his force will no longer supply "palace security" to keep people out of our Capitol.

*"Mrs. Walker, we need a parent-teacher conference.
Your son has been disrupting my state."*

*"I bought this poster board to use in my classroom,
but I'm using it here instead. It's still being used for my students."*

"I skipped school today so I can learn about tomorrow."

*"My teachers taught me how to stand up for myself.
Now I stand for them."*

*"Just because you didn't go to college
doesn't mean you can take away our education."*

*“Math tutoring this afternoon on second floor north.
Republicans urged to attend.”*

*“My autistic students work hard to communicate.
Why can’t my Governor?”*

Although Governor Walker wants to do away with all public unions, teachers are a big focus. For some right-wingers in Wisconsin teacher bashing is a sport second only to deer hunting. The teachers have received tremendous, although certainly not universal, support from parents and students. Madison schools were closed for three days as teachers flocked to the Capitol to protest. By 11:00 the first day students had organized via Facebook, and 1500 students marched to the Capitol to support their teachers. The signs they carried were among the most creative and intellectual I have seen - quotes from Lincoln, Eisenhower, and Roosevelt and references to Shakespeare, Voltaire, and Thomas Paine. Students have continued to protest in large numbers. Teachers from across the state were out in force on the weekends. They drove for hours from northern and western Wisconsin. Many that weren’t in Madison rallied in their own communities. Teachers are getting the double whammy from our Governor. Not only are they being hit in the pocketbook and having their bargaining rights stripped; they are also facing severe cutbacks in financial aid for all their school districts in the next budget.

“Welcome to the Ian’s Pizza rebellion of 2011.”

*“Pizza di Roma support from Pittsburgh –
no hard feelings about the Super Bowl”*

It started towards the end of the first week. People from across the country who wanted to help decided to order pizza. A locally owned business, Ian’s Pizza, has two outlets in Madison. The first is by the UW campus and the bars and does much of its business after bar time. It is THE place to stop on the way home from a night of celebrating whatever with whomever. They opened a second location a couple of years ago one block from the Capitol. People from across the country googled Madison pizza, began calling Ian’s to donate money, and the deliveries began.

By the first weekend the Capitol location of Ian's shut down to normal business and started making only 'Pizza for Protesters'. Pizza, water, and Gatorade would arrive at the Capitol every half hour or so. Protesters could also walk the block to Ian's and get free pizza and drinks there; usually about a 15-30 minute wait in line. I know Ian's got a pizza order last week from the weather station in Antarctica. We also got free food from local markets and other businesses - boxes of apples, bananas, and oranges; bags of carrots and celery; jars of peanut butter and loaves of bread; boxes of granola bars and candy bars, large trays of bagels and cream cheese. Did you know that you could get cream cheese in 2.5 gallon pails? The building trade unions grilled brats, polish sausages, and hot dogs every day for a week and gave them away. Several local coffee shops (and the lovely lady from Maine) helped keep those on the outside warm on the inside. The food stations in the Capitol required you (again the people's requirement) to use hand sanitizers before handling food to help keep us healthy.

"Wisconsin librarians will not be shushed."

"Elevator construction workers say Walker is going down."

*"Usually when this happens to me
it only costs me dinner and a few drinks." (for men)
"Couldn't you have at least bought me dinner
and a few drinks first?" (for women)*

"Why can't we be friends with benefits?"

sign on a jogger - "Runner against Walker"

*sign of an amputee in a wheelchair carrying her prosthesis –
"If this bill passes I won't have a leg to stand on."*

“Screw us and we multiply”

*“In Numbers (the bible) there is a talking ass.
I never thought that could be possible until we elected Scott Walker.”*

“Scott wants public employees to work for tips.”

“Walker is a weasel, not a badger.”

*picture of a young couple and their two children –
“Special interest group from Burlington”*

*sign with attached roll of Scott toilet tissue –
“At least Scott is good for something.”*

“Dear Scott, sorry about your short.....you know.”

Through all this we find things to laugh about. We are angry, but we are constructive and focused angry rather than tea party angry. We are actually having a good time to the extent that it is possible, and many signs reflect that. I have seen very few outright obscene or outright hateful signs, but there are some.

“Dear God, I’m sorry I took democracy for granted.”

“I love Bucky. I love the Pack. I want my Wisconsin back.”

We are all very clear about what has happened, and we know what we need to do. Too many of us took democracy for granted. A great deal of energy was put into the 2008 election and the results were a cause for celebration. I think too many of us thought that was it - problem solved. However, the Republicans became the 'Party of No', Democrats were timid, and hopes were not realized. Many people in Wisconsin sat out the 2010 election or voted for 'change'.

As a result we lost Senator Russ Feingold, one of the best friends of labor and working people; and we lost our governorship and both houses of the legislature. Many people protesting the last two weeks voted for Governor Walker, and many did not vote at all. They now fully realize the consequences of their actions or inactions, and I think they will remember. I have seen members of my union protesting that I can't remember having ever seen at a union meeting. They know the price we are paying for not being vigilant and for taking democracy for granted.

This has been a very polite protest largely devoid of four letter words, but we all know there is one four letter word that we have to use over and over again.

VOTE

In Solidarity,

**Gary L. Johnson
AFT Retirees Union**