

Let's *Not* Take America Back!

Ricardo Levins Morales May, 2011

The Madison worker uprising shook up the US political landscape. State governments that were peacefully going about their business forcing workers and communities to pay for upper class gluttony are facing resistance on a scale they had not imagined. Instead of letting their fellow workers be picked off and destroyed sector by sector, a wide swath of the working public rose in support of Wisconsin teachers and state workers. This, in turn, has given new juice to efforts to challenge tax-dodging banks, defend school programs and resist corporate land grabs across the country. It has changed the discussion from “whose needs should get axed, since the money is gone?” to “Hey! Who stole the money!?” The assault on unions and the public sector is continuing unabated, however, and we’ll need some serious strategic realignment if we wish to avoid the dystopian future that’s been ordered up for us.

The prospects for any social movement rest on the presence of three essential elements: unity, capacity and clarity. Like some nutrients in the body they need to be in balance or they turn toxic. Clarity by itself leads to frustration since you can see what needs doing but can’t get it done; unity alone results in missed opportunities, making it more difficult to rebuild unity down the road; capacity without its partners can deliver victories that slip through our fingers or that turn out to not be so great. How a movement defines what it is fighting for will influence the development of all three elements and will signal to other constituencies whether or not they have common objectives.

While the Wisconsin awakening was sparked by teachers and teaching assistants, the voices that have so far dominated the mic at rallies and press conferences have been union officials, elected Democrats and white populists united behind the slogan “Let’s take America back!” This rallying cry has a strong appeal to working class sectors that have seen the foundations of their world--livable jobs, educational access and affordable home ownership--collapse with the manufacturing economy and the consolidation of casino capitalism. “Taking America back” represents to them the return of a semblance of democracy and the dream of a rising living standard for each generation. In short, it appeals to a population that has a “reset” point, a time when things were not so bad to, which it can dream of returning.

The insecurity and repression being visited on the vaunted “middle class” are permanent features of life in communities of color. In these communities, the exhortation to return to “the good old days” does not hold the same magic. It represents a minor modification of a harsh status quo in which a timid white, liberal establishment would reclaim its old “seat at the table.” Some folk’s nostalgia is other folks’ déjà vu.

What *about* this “America” we’re supposed to be so eager to get back to? The relative security for white workers in the post-war era rested on a series of bad bargains that set the course for today’s class massacre. Among these was complicity with an interventionist foreign policy designed to create “attractive climates for investment” for US corporations in the global south. This was accomplished through implanting repressive regimes that would gut their nation’s public services and regulations, suppress unions, eliminate price controls on necessities and crush protest. Implemented by Democrats and Republicans alike with the support of the union bureaucracy, these policies prepared the greener pastures to which runaway manufacturing (and, more recently, many services) could relocate.

The outflow of manufacturing jobs coincided with the post-civil rights backlash against the gains of African-American workers. Management in agriculture, hospitality, meatpacking and other sectors moved systematically to replace Blacks with more vulnerable undocumented immigrants. As California hotel owners described it to researchers, Blacks were beginning to act “entitled” and were behaving too much like whites.¹ In other words they were acting as though they had citizenship rights and must therefore be replaced with workers who literally didn’t. This echoed the WWII displacement of Japanese farm workers and family farmers at the behest of western ag interests, who campaigned relentlessly for mass, race-based internment under the mantle of patriotism. That goal accomplished, they immediately clamored for a Bracero program to fill the newly created labor void with a vulnerable, contingent workforce.²

The replacement of one workforce with another was again accomplished by means of mass internment. Where racial codes had once barred African Americans from many occupations, housing opportunities and the voting booth, now these restrictions would be reserved for “criminals.” Criminal laws and police practices were dutifully adjusted to speed up the criminalization--en mass--of Black people. Simultaneously, immigration without documents--a civil infraction under US law--was re-cast as a national crisis of criminality necessitating its own parallel system of raids, mass detentions, incarceration centers and suspension of due process.

For some, the good old days are closer at hand. “If Wisconsin had done its job in the last election,” quipped one of the fugitive state legislators upon their return to Madison. “None of this would have been necessary.” It *would* have been necessary, of course; it just wouldn’t have been possible. Electing Wisconsin Democrats in 2010 would have preserved a status quo in which worker and democratic rights are bargained away in a controlled, incremental process without the messy recklessness of the Republican onslaught. The Democratic legislators from several states who went into exile to block anti-worker laws are to be lauded for their courage. They cannot, however, be expected to provide the vision that the moment demands. This reflects the realities of funding. Democrats can get behind targeting companies that contribute to Republican right wingers but are not down with identifying the corporate class as a whole as the problem--especially with the financial arms race for corporate money unleashed by the Citizens United Supreme Court ruling. But it is precisely the consensus of the corporate sector as a whole that is driving the restructuring of the global economy and the offensive against workers rights everywhere.

The Wisconsin bill which sparked the uprising is sometimes identified (including by Gov. Walker himself) as a “PATCO moment” for our time. It wasn’t. PATCO was the air traffic controllers’ union whose members’ firing by President Reagan in 1981 unleashed a ferocious nationwide offensive against private sector unions. Today’s PATCO moment came months before the Wisconsin governor made his move; in November, 2010, when President Obama announced a two-year freeze on federal workers’ wages. This action--negligible in its effect on the federal deficit--affixed the presidential seal of approval to the strategy of handing workers the bill--and the blame--for the economic havoc caused by Wall Street fraud, corporate tax relief and war. As Dan LaBotz predicted in Labor Notes:

“Now, around the country, governments at the city, county, and state level faced with budget deficits and already engaged in layoffs and furloughs will use the president’s position to justify their actions. Private industry—which hardly needed encouragement—will do the same.”³

Obama’s green light was not directed at Republicans or Democrats; it was a signal to management--public and private--and their pet politicians that open season on union contracts is in full swing. It’s about class, not party.

Mass criminalization-- be it of dark-skinned citizens or immigrants-- is a lynchpin for ensuring a divided and paralyzed working class. Its success is what permits the corporate class to move in for the kill. W. E. B. DuBois declared race the “Achilles heel” of organized labor. It is certainly a strategic blind spot to not

recognize that repressive immigration policy and mass racial incarceration--two pillars of US social policy-- are fundamentally labor issues as much as slavery was in its day.

The attack on public sector unions is part of the same strategic offensive as the decimation of public schools and services; corporate plunder of the treasury; subversion of climate policy; replacement of local government by corporate managers; "Free Trade" destruction of southern economies; and the assault on democratic communications. It is also linked to efforts to demonize and isolate sexual, religious and other minorities. The breadth of this attack overwhelms the go-it-alone strategy instinctively pursued by unions, non-profits and issue campaigns. The common wisdom is that if I allow my issue to get tangled up with yours, I lessen my chances of bringing home concessions (and, indeed, funders and officials reward lobbying to benefit narrow constituencies rather than broad efforts to improve things for everyone). This approach has yielded short-term benefits at times (when the elite were in a mood to share some goodies) but in the long run leaves us inexperienced and unprepared for the imperatives of broad-based, united struggle.

Everyone can feel the shift that is underway. A period of right wing ascendancy is giving way to one of right wing consolidation. Anything that stands in the way of capital accumulation has been targeted for elimination. The public square will either expand with a new wave of civic participation or it will shut down and sold off to the best-connected bidder. There's not much room for compromise. Under these conditions we need to make common cause among all sectors who are in the crosshairs. Workers--unionized, non-union and displaced--citizen and immigrant; service providers and service recipients; cast-off veterans and cast-out homeless; and the discriminated-against of all flavors, are the basis for a coalition of the discarded. Such unity can only be forged under a program that embraces all of us; one that fights unapologetically for our common good.

In the early nineteenth century Tecumseh worked to forge the tribes west of the Appalachians into a united confederation capable of blocking the expansion of the hungry, young nation on their east flank. He tried to convince them that the United States was determined to absorb all Native lands and therefore seeking individual agreements would be suicidal. Some Nations were not convinced. They opted to side with Washington or to remain neutral in the hopes of protecting their own threatened land bases. The moment Tecumseh was defeated, however, the accommodationist tribes suffered the same fate at the hands of Washington as the resisting ones. Tecumseh had read the signs correctly. Today we face a similar challenge. There are no concessions we can make that will mollify the corporate appetite in the early twenty-first century; our only possible protection lies in a sufficiently powerful and united resistance.

Nostalgia for a lost era of relative comfort and merit-based upward mobility also the theme song of the Tea Party. They take it one logical step further, though: if the white "middle class" had a measure of success and security due to its own hard work then it follows that those who didn't experience that security must not have worked as hard or been as smart. For them taking America back is explicitly a return to a time when the dark, the gay, the female and the foreign were kept in their place. Those days are not coming back; they lie crushed in the rubble of a crumbling superpower and the shimmering mirage of its casino economy. That's not a bad thing.

"An injury to one is an injury to all," is the most powerful organizing principle yet devised. It is a far cry from hawking white, middle class nostalgia. Far more promising than the reactionary "Let's Take America Back," is the solidarity-building message "We've got your back!" It's a principle which, if applied boldly, can derail the corporate/right-wing game plan. But--and this is our challenge--it will need to be applied more broadly, more deeply and more courageously than is our custom in the United States. It will require joint campaigns, cooperative education and mutual support among the diverse targets of economic restructuring and social repression. Most importantly it must be a unity that encompasses--at its

core--the huge sectors of our people that have targeted with criminalization. They have been declared off limits by the elite for a reason: they hold the key to working class unity.

It doesn't take prophetic vision to know that many of the leaders riding today's wave of worker resistance will do their best-- as soon as the chance arises-- to stuff the genie back in the bottle. They value their hard-won respectability and their imagined influence in the halls of power. The uncontrollable messiness of grassroots insurgency is outside their comfort zone. Our unions, mass organizations and elected representatives have a role to play, but their sails only fill when there's a strong wind blowing from the streets and shop floors. We cannot ultimately rely on leadership which acts boldly only when forced to and accommodates to power when allowed to. This uprising--and our broader capacity to resist the corporate onslaught--will rise or fall on the strength of bottom-up initiatives, emerging leadership and the advent of structures of resistance that transcend economic sector, legal status and race. As in Tecumseh's day the essential first step is to accurately identify the breadth and scale of the assault on civil society and human rights (in which our weakened labor organizations are the target du jour). That will simultaneously establish the necessary breadth and scale of our response.

As our conservative counterparts have demonstrated, language matters. How we choose to declare what we are fighting for plays an important role in determining who will recognize our fight as also being theirs. It will signal whether or not we understand that their fight is also ours. It matters. My Anishinabe and Lakota friends don't get a warm fuzzy feeling when they hear 20,000 mostly white folk singing "this land is my land." The "America" that the dark and poor hunger for is one that has never been.

The months and years ahead will be pivotal ones for our country and our world. The contest for the future will take twists and turns that are impossible for us to foresee. There's one point on which we should clear from the outset, though: we're not going back!

¹ Alienation and resistance: New Possibilities for Working-Class formation, Margaret Zamudio. *Social Justice: A Journal of Crime, Conflict and world Order*. Vol. 31, No. 3.

² Juliana Pegues, "(In)Visible Workers and War: Links of Labor, Gender and Citizenship in the Mexican Bracero Program and Japanese American Internment"

³ Dan LaBotz, *Labor Notes*, Dec. 2010