

Wisconsin: A story of freedom and democracy



“ **B**ut restoring the American dream requires more than restoring a sound, productive economy, vitally important as that is. It requires a return to spiritual and moral values, values so deeply held by those who came here to build a new life. We need to restore those values in our daily life, in our neighborhoods and in our government's dealings with the other nations of the world. These are the values inspiring those brave workers in Wisconsin.

“They remind us that where free unions and collective bargaining are forbidden, freedom is lost. They remind us that freedom is never more than one generation away from extinction. You and I must protect and preserve freedom here or it will not be passed on to our children. Today the workers in Wisconsin are showing a new generation not how high is the price of freedom but how much it is worth that price.”

A famous American politician said these words in defense of workers fighting for their right to do what we do every day: bargain collectively. Was it President Obama, Harry Reid or Nancy Pelosi? No. Was it former President Clinton or even former Wisconsin Sen. Russ Feingold? No, it was Ronald Reagan—though, to make a point, I changed just one of his words in two places. I replaced the word “Poland” with the word “Wisconsin.” Reagan said this while running for president in 1980 at a time when Polish workers were fighting the Soviet-backed government for rights that every American took for granted—the rights to form unions and to bargain collectively.

My, how the world has changed. Ronald Reagan would no longer be welcome in today's Republican Party, or at least in its predominant anti-worker faction. Yes, he fired the air traffic controllers for striking illegally and heartlessly refused to give them their jobs back when the strike ended, but he didn't stop the National Air Traffic Controllers Association from reconstituting itself. He didn't deny them their right to bargain collectively.

Yet the anti-labor majority of the GOP has rallied around state governors from their

party in Wisconsin, Ohio and elsewhere who are seeking to destroy collective bargaining for public employees. This is not only bad for the public workers in those states, and therefore a direct threat to other public employees (like us) who still have these rights, but it is also a direct threat to our long-held views about the meaning of freedom and democracy in America.

Collective bargaining is not just about our rights as individuals to band together to protect our common interests; it's also about providing a fair and practical method for reconciling different and competing interests. This plays out in the workplace and in the nation's political debates.

Look at our own experience in recent years. Thanks to collective bargaining, we have been able to negotiate win-win solutions to a wide range of workplace problems. We developed the Dispute Resolution and Intervention processes and negotiated a number of automation, subcontracting and route adjustment agreements, not to mention two five-year labor contracts. Meanwhile, as the country begins the painful task of restoring stability to the nation's finances, our union gives letter carriers a voice on Capitol Hill in the political process, a seat at the table. This makes democracy real for us, allowing us to defend our interests, pensions and health plans while Congress grapples with how best to close the massive federal budget deficit.

Our experience is replicated throughout the American labor movement. In a society in which corporate interests and those with great wealth have an inordinate ability to extract the benefits of economic growth and to influence public policy to their benefit, it is crucial that workers have the countervailing power to demand a fair share of the economic pie. Unions make this possible.

Ronald Reagan knew how central unions and collective bargaining are to freedom and democracy. Unfortunately, too many politicians in his party have forgotten this basic truth. We must help them relearn it by prevailing in Wisconsin and elsewhere. America's freedom and democracy depend on it. ☒