

Call to action

Focus shifts to recalls in Wisconsin; NALC joins nationwide mobilization



On April 4, 1968, the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, where he had gone to support public employees in their struggle for collective-bargaining rights, a voice at work and a chance at a better life. Forty-three years later, that effort continues—with attacks coming from state governments around the country, pressing for the repeal of those hard-won rights.

NALC and the AFL-CIO have called on all union members to participate in a national mobilization to show our solidarity. As part of that mobilization, a day of nationwide teach-ins, vigils, faith events, worksite leafleting and other activities was still in the planning stage as this issue went to press.

“While Monday is not the best day for our members to be able to participate in an organized event,” NALC President Fredric V. Rolando said, “that’s just one activity where we will stand beside our union brothers and sisters in body and spirit to let those who are trying to take away our basic rights know that an assault on one is an assault on all.”

We’ll need that unity in the face of two swift defeats that came out of the Midwest this past month, as both Ohio and Wisconsin passed bills ending many collective-bargaining rights for their public employees. As *The Postal Record* reported in our cover story last month, Ohio and Wisconsin were part of a larger, concerted attack, using the cover of budget deficits to target collective-bargaining rights for employees, such as teachers, firefighters, police and nurses.

In the following pages, you’ll find information on bills introduced by anti-union forces in more than a dozen statehouses this year, as well as more details on the union campaign to defend workers’ rights.

Wisconsin

Much of the public attention and media spotlight has focused squarely on Wisconsin, where Tea Party-backed Republican Gov. Scott Walker put forward a budget proposal that went well beyond demanding concessions from unions. The unions quickly accepted the benefit-reduction demands, but Walker, showing his true goals, refused to take yes for an answer.

Saying he had no funds to negotiate with, Walker not only refused to come to the negotiating table with the unions, he vowed to take the negotiating table away. The bill called for the elimination of any collective-bargaining rights except for limited wage





Wisconsin State Association President Scott Van Derven explains what is at stake with Gov. Scott Walker's budget bill.

bargaining and forced workers to pay a larger portion toward their health care and pensions.

After the budget proposal raced through the Assembly, 14 state senate Democrats fled the state, depriving the body of the 20-member quorum needed for considering fiscal bills. With the senators holed up in Illinois for close to three weeks, the Wisconsin statehouse became the focus of intense protests from union activists and supporters, who called on Walker to play fair.

For weeks, Madison resembled a capital under siege, with passions running high for a stream of protestors who occupied the statehouse and refused to budge. NALC activists from around the country walked, drove and flew to Madison to join the protests and stand with their union brothers and sisters. A special NALC-led event was held on March 6, where Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Nicole Rhine and Wisconsin State Association President Scott Van Derven spoke to a crowd of thousands.

"Today, every letter carrier and every union member in America—public or private—consider themselves citizens of this great state," Rhine said. Reminding the crowd why collective bargaining was so important for lifting carriers out of so-called "collective begging" and into a living wage, she added, "We fought hard to win these rights and can't let political opportunists like Gov. Walker and his allies take them away."

Proving Walker's real agenda, union officials offered to make concessions necessary to offset the budget shortfalls, as long as collective-bargaining rights were preserved. Public opinion supported the unionists, with polls showing that 57 percent of likely voters disapproved of the job the governor was doing. Polls also showed that the public overwhelmingly backed the employees' right to maintain collective bargaining—

three recent national polls, conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* and NBC News, *The New York Times* and CBS, and *USA Today* and the Gallup Organization, confirm that Americans oppose weakening collective-bargaining rights for unions by a two-to-one margin.

Just when it seemed that a compromise might be reached, mere hours after reports emerged that Walker had e-mailed the missing senators about possible solutions, Republican state senators crafted a way to shove the legislation through, splitting the collective bargaining portion into a non-fiscal bill that didn't require a quorum. Despite state law, which requires a 24-hour advance notice for a public meeting, Republicans held the Senate session just two hours later, and quickly passed the new bill, to cries of "Shame! Shame!" from gathered protestors.

"What the Wisconsin GOP and Governor Walker did last night was shameful," Rolando said the next day. "Using a state budget crisis caused by a great recession created on Wall Street to attack the fundamental rights of Wisconsin public employees to bargain for middle-class wages, benefits and working conditions is just plain wrong."

A move to recall 12 state senators—six Republicans and six Democrats—was just getting organized as this magazine was being prepared, and NALC leaders at all levels were encouraging members to volunteer to help with those efforts.

Opposite page (top): NALC Assistant Secretary-Treasurer Nicole Rhine tells the rally that all union members consider themselves citizens of Wisconsin.

Opposite page (bottom): Iowa State Association Vice President Stephanie Stewart at the Feb. 22 We are One rally in Des Moines.



Above and opposite page (middle photo): NALC members, other union activists and supporters gather on March 6 for a special Sunday protest outside the Wisconsin statehouse.



Above: AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka calls for support for Wisconsin union members.

Above right: Carriers from Chicago Branch 11 drum up media awareness in Illinois.



Ohio

While Wisconsin's bill targeted many collective-bargaining rights, it excluded unions representing police officers, firefighters and state troopers. Ohio Gov. John Kasich's Senate Bill 5 is yet more extreme, affecting all public-sector union employees in the Buckeye State. It also reduces sick leave and annual leave for long-time workers and makes it illegal for workers to strike. The legislation goes so far that even some Republicans in the senate balked.

Without enough Democrats to threaten a quorum, the bill was expected to have smooth sailing, until several Republican senators promised to slow or block the bill in committee. So the Senate leadership took the unusual step of having the dissenting voices removed, removing two senators from their committees just before the votes took place.

As action on the bill was concluding in the senate, Kasich gave his State of the State speech, promising that the budget shortfalls

would not affect the tax cuts passed in January. Protestors standing outside vowed to gather the signatures necessary to bring the law to referendum.

Elsewhere

These fights are not limited to Wisconsin and Ohio. Statehouses around the country

have been using the economy and budget deficits as cover for legislation that attacks unions.

"The economic crisis—triggered by decades of reckless deregulation and an out-of-control financial sector—caused the economy to crash, unemployment to soar, tax revenues to plummet and pension funds to tank in value," Rolando said. "The notion of 'shared sacrifice' and asking those who really caused the crisis to help close the budget deficits is entirely absent from the national debate."

Some of the bills under consideration are listed below, with some more likely to pass than others:

California—If passed, a bill would give public schools the option to ignore seniority when deciding which teachers to lay off.

Florida—Legislators brought forward multiple bills that would complicate local unions' administration and even jeopardize their existence.

Idaho—A bill in the state Senate threatens to phase out tenure for teachers, as well as restrict collective bargaining.

Indiana—Legislation that would weaken collective bargaining for teachers and other public employees, strip away wage protections in public projects and siphon state dollars off to private schools was blocked when nearly 40 house Democrats fled to Illinois.

Iowa—A bill that has passed the house would strip state employees' right to negotiate over health care or layoffs.

Kansas—The house passed a bill making it illegal for public-employee unions to endorse candidates and making it harder for them to raise money for campaigns.

Maine—Although no specific legislation has been introduced, Gov. Paul LePage has indicated he supports efforts to roll back state workers' collective-bargaining rights.

Massachusetts—Unions would have their say regarding policies on hiring, promotions and the use of part-time workers eliminated.

Michigan—Legislators have made moves to extend the powers of emergency managers to terminate collective bargaining, without first gaining approval from an elected body.



A rally at the state capitol in Denver drew approximately 500 supporters, including NALC members from throughout Colorado.

The Wisconsin State Association participated in protests in the state-house in Madison.



Missouri—A bill in the house could make deducting union dues more difficult.

Nebraska—Ending all collective-bargaining rights for state and local workers is on the table in the legislature.

New Hampshire—Lawmakers are looking for ways to repeal the right of public-sector employees to form a union via majority sign-up (also known as “card check”).

New Jersey—Gov. Chris Christie has pressed for public employees to pay nearly 22 percentage points more toward their health care premiums.

New York—The legislature is considering a bill aimed at making it easier to lay off teachers despite their seniority.

South Carolina—Though the state doesn’t allow government workers to join a union to negotiate for pay or benefits, a new bill would go even further, allowing private businesses to ignore federal rules requiring them to notify their workers that they can form a union.

Tennessee—If a bill in both legislative chambers passes, school districts would have the right to refuse to negotiate with teachers unions.

National mobilization

“We may have lost this battle, but the fight has just begun,” Rolando said in a letter to branch and state leaders about the Wisconsin situation. “The attack on worker rights in Wisconsin has ignited the labor movement nationwide like nothing else in years. This is not over; the unions will fight this in the courts and at the ballot box.”

To help with the fight, NALC will release close to two dozen members to work in some of the above-mentioned states, helping to rally public sentiment and to work on recall measures. Additionally, the NALC Executive Council has authorized a substantial contribution to a national media and voter canvassing campaign. And the NALC will join with the entire labor movement for a national day of mobilization on April 4 to rally public support for the rights of all workers to organize and collectively bargain in both the private and public sectors.

“April 4 is the anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., who died in

Memphis trying to help the sanitation workers of that city win dignity and bargaining rights on the job,” Rolando said.

During the “We Are One” mobilization on April 4, union members across the country are urged to demonstrate their solidarity with America’s workers and to continue the fight to protect the rights of workers to bargain collectively for a better life.

The latest mobilization details and updates will be provided on the NALC website. Members can also keep up with the very latest news and activities related to the national campaign via the NALC’s Activist Alert blog at nalcactivistalert.com.

In the coming weeks, the NALC also will recruit volunteer activists to help with the single biggest union-organizing campaign now underway in the United States. Throughout April, nearly 50,000 transportation security officers who work at the nation’s airports will be voting in a union-recognition election.

A letter from the AFL-CIO Executive Council, encouraging local branches from all unions to step up their participation in central labor councils and state federations of labor, is posted at nalc.org. Rolando urged all NALC branches to join local CLCs and state federations as resources permit.

“If the corporate-financed politicians, think tanks and special interests succeed in stripping state and local workers of their rights, it will be only a matter of time before they turn their sights on postal employees and our rights,” the president said. “Let us join together and stop them now. Let’s use the energy and solidarity of the fights in Wisconsin and elsewhere to strengthen our union, and to spark an historic drive to rebuild the labor movement in the private sector as well.” ✉



Throughout the country, sympathy protests were held in places as far away as Portland, OR, (below) and Washington, DC (bottom).

