



## Fighting for America's soul

**I** can't recall the number of times President Emeritus Vince Sombrotto reminded all of us that "what Congress has given us, Congress can take away." Vince was usually talking about collective bargaining for letter carriers and postal employees.

As a leader of the 1970 postal strike that led to Congress granting postal unions collective bargaining, he knew that at any moment, Congress could strip us of our bargaining rights. That's why he argued repeatedly that the union must maintain its force in the legislative and political arenas.

What Vince said during his almost 24 years as national president is still true here in Washington. And in Madison, WI, and state capitals throughout the nation.

So much has been said about the struggle of public employees in Wisconsin and elsewhere to preserve collective bargaining that it is difficult to say anything that has been not been said before—or will not be said in the four weeks between my writing this and when you will read it. But not to write about "Wisconsin"—now a metaphor for union-busting and much more—would be to avoid the most critical issue facing the labor movement and, at the risk of hyperbole, the nation.

**What's the struggle of public employees—and all workers—in state capitals all about?**

It's *not* about balancing state budgets. Yes, most states have serious financial problems, but in many states, public-employee unions already have agreed to significant give-backs in wages and benefits, while newly elected "Tea Party"-affiliated politicians pay off their corporate backers with tax cuts. In Wisconsin, for example, Gov. Scott Walker and state legislators reduced revenues over the next few years by \$120 million prior to trying to close a present budget gap of \$130 million on the backs of the state's public employees.

It *is* about eliminating collective bargaining of public-employee unions (and in some cases, even private-sector unions) and thus denying the right of employees to have a voice in determining their wages, benefits and working conditions. Walker, Ohio Gov. John Kasich and their brethren want workers to shut up, do what they're told, and accept whatever crumbs anti-worker politicians throw their way.

It *is* about weakening, if not eliminating, the *political* rights of state and local workers. For example: If Walker is successful in Wisconsin, any public-employee union

member can opt out of paying dues, unions will have to be "re-certified" every year, and they will no longer be able to have members' dues withdrawn automatically from their paychecks. Unions will be struggling just to exist, let alone participate in the political process.

It *is* about this nation's ever-growing income inequality as the rich get richer, the poor get poorer, and the middle class disappears.

It *is* about what kind of a nation we are, whether we believe in equal opportunity for all, whether we believe the public good trumps private greed, whether we believe that to build the future for ourselves and our children and our children's children, we have to enlarge the public sphere—educate the next generation, improve and expand the nation's infrastructure, and preserve and protect the environment.

And yes, it *is* about preserving and building the nation's labor movement, the one entity in this country that has worked to expand the country's middle class, that has labored tirelessly on behalf of *all* workers, union and non-union alike, for better wages and benefits and workplace protections, health care and retirement security, and, most of all, a voice at the workplace. This is why letter carriers have joined their union brothers and sisters protesting in state capitals throughout the country—and all of us should applaud their efforts.

But the fight in Madison and elsewhere is more than a fight about unions. With the labor movement, especially in the private sector, a shadow of what it was just a generation ago, the struggle is going to be won over the long run. If the Scott Walkers and his ilk are to be defeated, if social justice and economic equality will trump short-sided, ideologically motivated politics, then *all* working Americans, whether union members or not, must join the fray.

**Letter carriers must stand side by side with other trade unionists throughout the country.** But we have to recruit our friends and family members, our neighbors, and members of religious, women's and minority organizations. The fight that has just begun is *their* fight as much as it is ours, and it will be won only if working Americans recognize that what has bound the diverse peoples of this country over time has been our commitment to stand together in the pursuit of the *common* good.

Unions will be at the front of the struggle. But we can't do it alone. Let's rally every American worker to join with us to create a better and more just America. ☒