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Christine Sleeter, President

Bette Tate Beaver, Exec. Director

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The Attack on Public Education: Back to the Future?

We are sure NAME members are paying close attention to what is going on in Wisconsin, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Florida, New Jersey, Nevada, Arizona and Texas, to name but a few of these 50 states. The actions of governors, legislators, and conservative educational activists are harbingers of conservative and neo-liberal policies that corporations and their political allies are seeking to implement across the country.

Please consider Wisconsin as an example and metaphor. The budget Governor Scott Walker delivered on March 1, 2011, proposes “reductions in public school funding of more than \$900 million and a new revenue limit that mandates a \$500 per-pupil reduction in property tax authority” (Richards, Feb. 28, 2011). At the same time private, tax supported schools are to be expanded, in spite of the egregious impact this would have on access to formal education for those most underserved. Moreover, for those who would argue that public schools are not serving our children, research has NOT shown that students enrolled in private schools do better on standard measures of assessment (and this is without challenging the validity of the assessment measures used). We need to put more money into developing public schools that are culturally responsive and empowering for all students.

On an even more troubling note, Walker’s budget, combined with the Budget Repair Bill, signals dire consequences for democracy itself. The Budget Repair Bill would eliminate the rights of most union members to engage in collective bargaining, except for salary increases only up to the consumer price index. In fact, it would destroy public unions by preventing them from raising dues, and requiring them to hold elections each year. In a climate of an increasing divide between the haves and have-nots (Wilkinson & Pickett, 2009; Harvey, 2010), the budget sends a clear signal that this governor, along with his cronies, aims to reify an anti-democratic, social hierarchy that will take us back to the future. His “tea party” cronies in this endeavor include Governor Kasich in Ohio, whose legislature pushed through Senate Bill 5 on a 17-16 vote on March 2. This bill abolishes *all* public union collective bargaining; to show their recognition that the bill will lead to a socially unjust, political and economic sea change, six Republicans voted against it.

Walker’s tea party “sponsors” include oil tycoon David Koch. The Koch brothers have a lot of vested interests in

Contact Us:

NAME@NAMEorg.org



Christine Sleeter, President

csleeter@gmail.com



Bette Tate Beaver, Exec. Dir.

NAME@NAMEorg.org

Wisconsin, including paper products and mining. David Koch's patriarchal relationship with Walker was revealed in a prank call posted on YouTube. In this call, The Daily Beast editor, posing as Koch, chatted amicably with Walker who, suspecting nothing amiss, willingly discussed their collective agenda from "ground zero" (TheBeastVideos, Feb 22, 2011). Walker shared his ruse to trick the Wisconsin Democratic senators into returning to Wisconsin. The senators have moved to Illinois as the only means they could see to put pressure on Walker to negotiate a compromise to the bill that current polls, even those carried out by the conservative Wall Street journal, show to be unacceptable to the majority of the people. In his conversation with fake Koch, Walker also declared that he had contemplated planting "trouble makers" to stir up the crowds assembled in Madison to protest the Budget Repair Bill. He thanked "Koch" for all of his "support in moving the cause forward," an admission that his budget and bill are ideological and not about the deficit. In addition, Walker's acceptance of "Koch's" reward of a trip to California once their collective goals have been achieved may violate the strong Government Accountability (Ethics) Board code in Wisconsin.

In Walker's budget the cap on charter school enrollment is to be repealed, which for many is a back door way in to increased privatization of schools, which has long been a national movement. Commenting on Senate Bill 5 that just passed in Ohio, one Ohioan public school teacher commented: "The politicians who support Senate Bill 5 are intentionally shifting public education to corporations that own charter schools. Privatized police and fire protection will be provided by corporations that place profit at the top of their priorities" (Czech, P., February 22, 2011). For many who are seriously at odds with Walker and his tea party and conservative peers, education is a human right that should not be bought and sold for profit. Remember Article 26 of the 1948 International treaty on Human Rights, which became international law in 1976:

1. Everyone has the [right to education](#). Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.
2. Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.
3. Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Sherry Posnick Goodwin, a journalist for the California Teachers Association, wrote in September 2010 about Sacramento schools that had fallen under corporate control, suggesting that they demonstrated success by failing to serve those most in need of educational "motivation." Writing about the St. Hope Charter High School, formally Sacramento High School, Posnick-Goodwin stated

enrollment is dwindling and the school is in its third year of Program Improvement. It received a bronze medal from U.S. News for raising test scores, going from 719 to 731 on the API from 2008 to 2009, but has received criticism for "counseling out" students who are



not successful. Some say the college-prep school is intent on only serving motivated students. Those who cause trouble are "shipped out" to other schools, say critics. (Posnick-Goodwin, S., September 2010)

In Walker's proposed budget, funding for charter schools is to come from state equalized aid, which is "general financial assistance to public school districts for use in funding a broad range of school district operational expenditures" (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2011). All 4-year University of Wisconsin system campuses, which will suffer huge cuts and a potential dismantling of the system of which they are part, will be able to establish charter schools. However, the provision in the budget that is perhaps most horrifying for those of us in teacher education is that teachers at independent charter schools will not longer have to receive state (DPI) certification. To teach in a charter school in Wisconsin, teachers will only need a bachelor's degree (AFT Wisconsin, American Federation of Teachers, initial analysis of the budget).

The AFT's initial analysis also concluded that

Scott Walker's proposals will eliminate early childhood programs that we know work best to help children succeed, and eliminate advanced placement classes and science and engineering at a time when we need more resources to help our students compete in the global economy. The Governor recommends eliminating the following GPR-funded categorical aid programs: (a) aid for children-at-risk programs; (b) alternative education grants; (c) English for Southeast Asian children; (d) grants for advanced placement courses; (e) grants for alcohol and other drug abuse prevention and intervention programs; (f) grants for improving pupil academic achievement; (g) grants for nursing services; (h) grants for preschool to grade 5 programs; (i) grants for science, technology, engineering and mathematics programs; and (j) supplemental aid. (AFT-Wisconsin, WEAC, & the Institute for Wisconsin's Future, March 3, 2011).

A plethora of voices with an historical, economic memory are making Walker's "shock doctrine" (Klein, 2007) known. These voices are coming to us via Free Speech TV (Thom Hartmann, Democracy Now, and Grit TV) and MSNBC (Rachel Maddow and Ed Schultz); online news media (AlterNet, TruthOut); and staggeringly loud and informed social networking. The voices are pointing out that Walker's claim that his budget and Budget Repair bill are necessary actions to address the budget deficit are a manufactured "crisis" (Klein, 2007) to legitimize his political actions.

On the other hand, according to the Cap Times editorial of Feb 16th, 2011, the Wisconsin Legislative Fiscal Bureau released a memo on Jan 3, 2011, predicating that the state would end the year with a budget surplus of \$121.4 million. (Cap Times Editorial, March 2, 2011). In addition, a legitimate budget crisis could always be resolved by raising taxes on the wealthiest 2% of the population and on corporations that currently pay little or no taxes. This approach has been undertaken historically by Republicans who were committed to the public interest. Peterr, blogging at the online news site, *Firedoglake*, wrote about the equitable manner in which Robert La Follette, Republican governor of Wisconsin in 1900, balanced the budget. La Follette stated in his autobiography (*Italics my own*):



Indeed, we so reorganized and equalized our whole system of taxation that the state today is on a sounder, more businesslike foundation than ever before. We brought in so much property hitherto not taxed or unequally taxed that, while the expenses of the state have greatly increased, still the burden of taxation on the people has actually decreased. While corporations in 1900 paid taxes of \$2,059,139 a year, in 1910 they paid \$4,221,504 a year, or more than double. Wisconsin today leads all the states of the union in the proportion of its taxes collected from corporations. It derives 70 per cent, of its total state taxes from that source, while the next nearest state, Ohio, derives 52 per cent...

All of these new sources of income (including an inheritance tax and graduated income tax) have enabled us to increase greatly the service of the state to the people without noticeably increasing the burden upon the people. *Especially have we built up our educational system. In 1900 the state was expending \$550,000 a year on its university; in 1910 it appropriated over \$1,700,000, and there has been a similar increase for our normal and graded schools and charitable institutions.* (Peterr, Feb 22, 2011).

In fact, the post civil right era, up until the onset of Reagan policies, higher taxes were associated with higher employment and a much less economically divided society. (In the Clinton era, a slight rise in taxes led to greater economic growth.) So we may ask, how is it possible that today we have in power governors who propose addressing an economic deficit caused by the reckless profiteering of corporations not by taxing those who caused the problem but by crushing those who can least afford it? In Wisconsin, public school children, and those on BadgerCare—the Wisconsin Medicaid program that ensures that 98 percent of Wisconsin residents have access to quality, affordable health care—and SeniorCare will be the ones to suffer most under Walker’s proposals. And governors are seeking to replicate Wisconsin-like laws and policies elsewhere. The public sphere of society, the last bastion of democracy, and the space in which the social contract with our brothers and sisters is theoretically guaranteed, is to be eliminated as Walker also proposes selling off state assets to his cronies in no-bid deals.

As Dave Johnson said recently (March 4, 2011), we need to connect the dots. We can do that! We are educators – in the business of critical thinking. Check out the Johnson’s connections, relevant to us all.

Dots: Trade deals close factories, outsource jobs and pit workers against each other, then wages decline and unemployment is really high, while all the money goes to a few at the top. Then calls to cut the wages and benefits of the rest.

Dots: Unions squashed, then pensions disappear, then calls to get rid of public-employee unions because they have pensions.

Dots: Tax cuts for the rich, then panic over resulting deficits, then calls for cuts in the things government does for We, the People.

People are connecting the dots: Unions mean better wages, benefits and working conditions.

Joshua Holland is one of these dot connectors. He blogged on Alternet (March1, 2011)

The governor presented a budget on Tuesday that calls for “big cuts in state aids to schools, local governments and the UW System and a tight cap on property taxes,” according to



Wispolitics.com. He and his fellow GOPers have introduced 8 other far-right measures in the purple state, and a poll released this week shows that if a rematch of last November's election were held today, Walker would lose by 7 points. Most of the drop in his support came from Republicans and independents in union households. Two recent national polls found the public opposed to stripping away public workers' right to bargain collectively by about a 2 to 1 margin. (Holland, 2011).

Holland goes on to say that

there will be litigation if the bill passes. According to Firedoglake's David Dayen, "lawyers plan to sue the state the moment Governor Walker signs any budget repair bill that includes the stripping of collective bargaining rights" (ibid).

Indeed, supporters are gearing up for a recall of the governor once he has been in office for a year. Indeed, signatures are already being sought for the recall of the eight senators who are presently eligible for recall.

What we are facing is not a simple political distinction between Republican and Democratic principles. It is a struggle for the type of educational system and society in which we want to live and raise our children. In his "bill for a more general diffusion of knowledge," Jefferson's idea was for all white children to receive 3 years of basic public school so they could "learn to read the Bible, the newspaper, and their taxes—enslaved Africans, Native people, and others of color were of course excluded from Jefferson's program.

The most talented of these children were to be selected and educated at public expense at regional grammar schools. From this select group, the most talented were to be chosen for further education. Thomas Jefferson wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia (1781/82)*, "By this means twenty of the best geniuses would be raked from the rubbish annually, and be instructed, at public expense." (Spring, 2008)

If we don't want future generations to be returned to a version of this Jeffersonian "prize," we must take action to resist the implementation and spread of the current conservative agenda. We can't allow corporations, and their political operatives like Walker and Kasich, to railroad us back to a system in which people had very limited rights and only some of our children were given life opportunities. If we do, it will be because we failed to struggle to retain these rights—human, civil, and labor.

Rights cannot be owned, bought or sold. However, we can only be assured that this will not occur if we are guaranteed a legally protected public sphere of society in which, for example, we are able to bargain collectively to create and maintain quality economic and educational systems that empower us all.

Now is the time for us all to see this reality. We need to pierce the hegemonic veil that ultra conservative political forces, working hand-in-hand with corporations, have thrown over current governmental and corporate maneuvering. Now is the time to do the research that will enable us to see how these forces have garnered the consent of so many people for anti-democratic, laws and policies that are not in their political or economic interest. Now is the time to become politically active.



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