



Scott Walker is Running for President by Attacking "Privileged" Unions and Universities

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Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker's prospects to win the Republican nomination got a huge boost in February 2015, when he rolled up his shirtsleeves to deliver an electrifying speech to Conservative Political Action Conference. He had proved his leadership mettle, Walker boasted, by carrying through a 2011 assault on public employee unions in Wisconsin – and then surviving a 2012 recall and a 2014 re-election contest. Walker went even further in a subsequent speech to the Club for Growth, linking his battle to Ronald Reagan's decision in 1981 to fire 11,000 striking air traffic controllers, a move Walker praised as "the most significant foreign policy decision of my lifetime" because it sent "a message around the world" that America is not to be "messed with." Wrapping himself in the Reagan mantle, Walker declared "if I can take on 100,000 protesters, I can do the same across the world."

Some observers dismissed equating Wisconsin unionists to enemies abroad as a feeble attempt to distract from Walker's lack of foreign policy experience. But that mistakes the clearly intended political message. As Walker knows, most Republicans who will vote in the 2016 primary elections are convinced that America needs a strong leader who will not back down. Walker claims that his attacks on unions – and now also on public universities in his state – signal his *Unintimidated* leadership, as the title of his campaign biography puts it.

A Fiscally Unnecessary – but Highly Symbolic – Attack

Walker won election to his state's governorship in 2010 without mentioning any plan to dismantle unions, but he led off in 2011 with aggressive proposals to cut back taxpayer contributions to public employees' pensions and health care and also destroy the longstanding rights of many unions. After a fiercely contested battle that saw thousands of union members demonstrate for weeks at the state capitol as Democratic legislators left the state in an attempt to prevent a quorum, the GOP-dominated legislature passed Walker's union-busting legislation. Except for firefighter and police unions, other public employee unions are limited to bargaining for wage increases that cannot exceed the rate of inflation. Contracts last for just a year at a time; and unions can no longer collect mandatory dues and must win annual votes to remain certified. The destruction of rights zeroed in on Wisconsin's teacher unions, which had been a bulwark of the state Democratic Party and nagging thorns in Republicans' sides for decades.

Walker immediately seized on this success as a demonstration of his resolve to choose tough battles and to fight them on behalf of ordinary taxpayers in opposition to what he called "privileged" public employees claiming higher pay and more benefits than other workers. The 2011 legislation cut employees' compensation by an estimated 16% and devastated public employee unions. Union membership dropped from 50% to 31% in just four years.

Did Walker's move to crush unions actually help Wisconsin's "hardworking taxpayers"? He saved \$3 billion in his first term – about one percent of state and local government spending – but the savings came from the pockets of teachers and other public servants who are also taxpayers and whose compensation, researchers have shown, is not out of line for workers with their educational credentials. Union-busting arguably did enable management flexibilities that could be used one day to implement school reforms, but Governor Walker has not taken advantage of the new possibilities.

Walker's anti-union law was not fiscally necessary. Although he suggested the legislation was needed to ensure the health of the state's public pension fund, that fund was already one of the strongest in the nation. In fact, Walker could have won most or all of that \$3 billion he saved through tough negotiations. Union leaders offered to make those concessions, but Walker refused. Why, then, did he go for the jugular in this conflict? In a word, he did it because he could and wanted the attendant political benefits. In a single blow, Scott Walker weakened the strongest organized forces supporting Democrats in the state, shifted costs from taxpayers to teachers, and stood tall as a Reagan-style "tough" decision-maker who would not back down.

The Next Target – Wisconsin's Public Universities

Following his 2014 re-election, Governor Walker signed still more union-busting measures, after the legislature passed a "right-to-work" bill prohibiting Wisconsin's dwindling private-sector unions from any longer collecting union dues from all workers they represent. Now Walker has moved on to targeting the state's university system, proposing big cuts in state support along with a weakening of long-standing faculty rights to tenure and participation in university governance. According to neutral experts, these steps are bound to undermine Wisconsin universities as they compete to attract and retain excellent professors and researchers. But Walker suggested that professors should just teach "more classes" and do "more work." This message may resonate with the Republican base because university professors, like unionized public employees, enjoy more job security than most American workers at a time when the U.S. economy has been rough and unforgiving.

Stoking Resentment as a Presidential Campaign Tactic

It would be a huge mistake to under-estimate Scott Walker's message or its potential appeal. As he's fond of pointing out on the campaign trail, he won three elections in four years by touting his no-nonsense efforts to fight Wisconsin's public employee unions and save taxpayers money. The unions, he claims, had used their political power to obtain outsized salaries, benefits, and job protections at taxpayer expense – so he is just ending unwarranted "privilege." That's a powerful theme with a potent political punch, especially with conservatives and many middle-of-the-road voters.

In one respect, Walker's approach is just raw politics, thrashing opponents as part of a larger effort to push a formerly blue state into red territory. But it also speaks to Walker's central theme of removing privileges from those who have reaped special benefits from government in order to refocus relief on hard-working taxpayers who do not enjoy such advantages. In the months to come, Scott Walker hopes his message of resentment against public employees and state university professors will propel him all the way to the White House.

Read more in Donald F. Kettl, "Scott Walker's Real Legacy," *Washington Monthly*, July/June/August 2015.