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I Am The Enemy: A Unionized Public Employee Speaks Out

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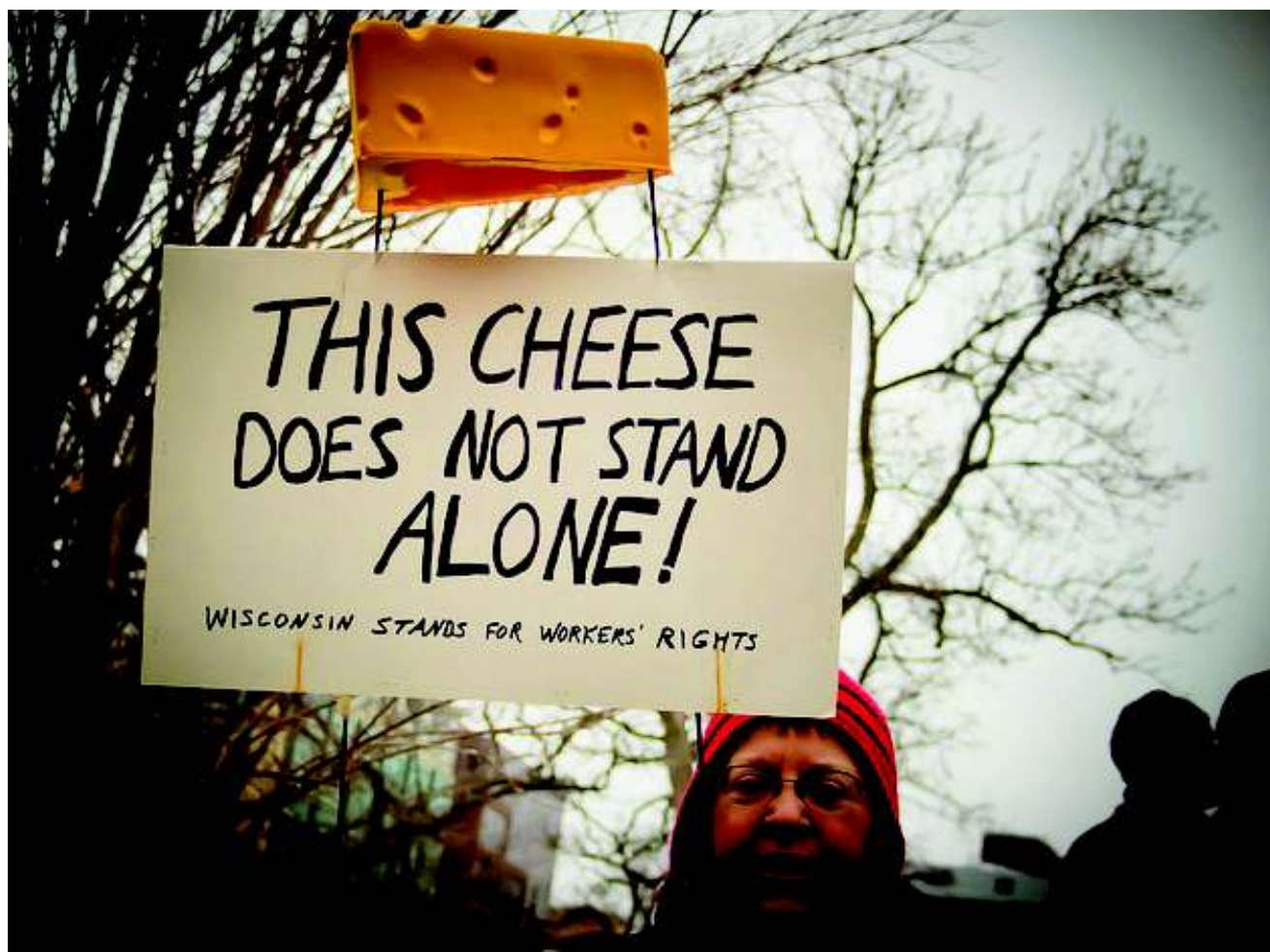


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FIGHTING FOR OUR FUTURE

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I AM the enemy

According to right wing commentators, university professor **Michael I. Niman** is one of those public employees responsible for the coming downfall of Western civilisation

If you listen to any Wall Street banker, right-wing talk radio host, or Republican politician, I am the enemy. I am a public employee. Along with snow plow operators in Wisconsin, meat inspectors in Iowa, welfare fraud investigators in California, transit workers in Chicago, life guards in Florida, air traffic controllers in Kansas, workplace safety inspectors in Kentucky, child abuse investigators in Oregon, teachers in North Carolina, highway engineers in Pennsylvania, park rangers in New York, and every other civil servant who doesn't commute to work in an armored personnel carrier, I am responsible for the downfall of Western civilisation.

My first job after leaving college was doing public relations work for a not-for-profit human services agency. The pay was low for a PR wonk, barely lifting me above the poverty line, but the work was rewarding. I'd like to think that the work I performed for my employer made the world a better place to live, at least for those folks who relied on our services to make it through the day, for their families, for their neighbors, and for the businesses that profited from their survival.

I also worked as a park ranger, primarily taking inner city children on boat tours of a wildlife refuge. I'd like to think this glimpse

into another world informed their perception of the possibilities that the world offered, and an appreciation for our place in the natural order.

I later worked supervising a tutoring program in a housing project. Again, the pay was low, but life made sense. It was good. I hoped that I was making the world a better place, as my religious education taught me to do, and I was earning a living, which is something my parents were happy to see me do



Given my educational background, which incidentally was primarily paid for by "big government," I could have earned more money, say, marketing sugary beverages to children or bloated SUVs to insecure and financially indebted drivers.

Drinking students

Eventually I did leave the public sector, taking a job in advertising, designing campaigns to, among other things, encourage college-aged folks to spend more time and money drinking. I was good at this, filling night clubs beyond their capacities with young drunks eager to empty their wallets into my client's coffers. In today's political zeitgeist, I had finally become a productive member of society.

This article's not really about me, how-

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ever. I just mention this early snippet of my employment history because the public service positions which I occupied were all subsequently defunded and eliminated by budget cuts in the wake of the Reagan revolution. These jobs, and more importantly, the services these and countless other professionals provided, were cut in order to finance tax cuts for the richest Americans, who at the same time began investing that money overseas in the “emerging markets” that later went on to drive many of our own industries out of business using our money and technology. As this was happening, our media reassured us that these newly minted titans were our heroes and our public servants were bums.

This story is repeated so much as to appear as obvious as the sky: Public workers are overpaid and their jobs are expendable. But let’s look a bit closer at this big lie. The reality is that public employees, and this still includes me, now a state university college professor actually earn less than our counterparts in the private sector. Yes, I understand that overall state workers seem well off. But if you look at the jobs they perform, which tend to be credentialed professional positions, they are paid less than workers with similar credentials in the private sector.

The real salary gap

Of course this is not the story you’ll see when you do a simple Google search on public versus private pay. That query will turn up a plethora of corporate media and right-wing think tank articles and studies citing that government workers earn more than those in the private sector. This is technically true in some areas if you only look at the raw data, but unfortunately that’s because most of our good-paying, unionized industrial jobs in the private sector have been lost to foreign sweatshops, often financed with the booty from the Reagan-era tax cuts. Rich investors make out quite well from this shift, but American workers have been forced into low-paying service sector

jobs. The result skews against private sector per capita income since most of these new jobs are low wage and low skilled as opposed to government positions.

The government, by contrast, still employs teachers, engineers, social workers, auditors, accountants, computer programmers, doctors, lawyers, administrators, chemists, and so on. At these skill levels, where the government does most of its hiring, private sector salaries have traditionally trended higher than public ones. Take college professors, for instance. The American Association of University Professors, an organization that represents faculty at both private and public institutions, reports that in 2009, faculty at private institutions earned 20 percent more than their colleagues at public institutions. This gap has made it difficult for public institutions to recruit and retain qualified faculty members.

Let’s look at public school teachers, who have somehow become public enemy number one. Most public teaching positions require advanced degrees. Someone with an advanced degree in, for example, chemistry, physics, law, or math can earn considerably more money working in the private sector, and they won’t have to schedule their bathroom breaks, police cafeterias, or buy their own work supplies.

Now apply this same math to the auditor working at your village office, the doctor working in a public health clinic, the computer systems administrator running your local 911 system, a conservation department biologist, and so on. The pay isn’t competitive. This gap is only to grow with corporations now flush with cash and still hiring for professional non-manufacturing positions while governments are broke. This is good news for the private sector as it continues its long tradition of sniping public employees, but bad for we the people, as we lose some of our best civil servants to the private sector.

The pension trap

Despite the pay gap, public sector recruit-

ers had something going for them that they learned from the private sector back in the heyday of the middle class when good jobs were plentiful and employers regularly sniped workers from each other: To hook workers with a non-transferable pension. Once Ford workers were vested in Ford's pension system, they'd be remiss to move over to a job at General Electric, even if the pay was better. That's why it was industry, and not unions, that birthed the idea of a strong pension that would be tied to the employer rather than the employee or her union. Governments followed in the footsteps of private industry, using pensions to tie their workers to their jobs. Over the years, the idea of a government-guaranteed pension emerged as an attractive alternative to earning a higher private sector salary. These pensions are not giveaways. They are part of a competitive pay package that still often lags behind the private sector.

In non-professional areas, unionized public employees have won contracts that put their pay ahead of non-unionized workers in the private sector. The key word here, more than "public" or "private," is "union." Unionized workers have usually been more successful than their non-unionized counterparts in retaining a greater share of the fruits from their increased productivity. Rather than being a reason for non-unionized workers to resent unionized workers, it should instead serve as an incentive to either organize a union or strive to find a unionized position.

This, by the way, is straight-up conservative free market economics. If unionized positions are more attractive, as the anti-union forces argue, then free market principles dictate that these position will attract a better, more productive workforce, which should be what we-the-public demand. And we've seen this as public employees have stepped up to the plate, maintaining public services despite years of budget cuts.

The war on the middle class

If you break the public employee unions,

you'll drive away many of these professionals, and you'll break the government. This might be what our moneyed corporate plutocracy ultimately wants since unionized government workers are charged with policing corporate malfeasance and enforcing the environmental and workers rights laws that corporations so despise.

There's another way of looking at the "union workers get paid too much" argument. Yes, unionized public sector sanitation workers usually make more than their private sector counterparts. But the fact is, the job sucks and workers who do it should receive adequate compensation.

Rather than begrudge a living wage to a unionized sanitation worker, an exploited non-union worker should focus his own energy on organizing to improve his own working conditions or salary. Ultimately, the unionized worker's better salary, assuming he or she has one, raises the bar for everyone, and we're all in this together.

What we're seeing in this year's Republican assault on public employee unions is not really about balancing budgets. That's the cover, the smokescreen. The real war is being waged by the corporate sponsors who, through their newly legalized unlimited political contributions, have bought and paid for a new wave of legislators to do their bidding.

Look at Wisconsin's radical right-wing governor, Scott Walker, for example. He's the man who inadvertently turned his own statehouse into an American Tahrir Square by attempting to legislate away workers rights to form a union and bargain for a contract in direct violation of Article 23 of the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was codified into international law in 1948 with the strong support of the United States. Walker's recent electoral rise to the statehouse was underwritten by, among others, those billionaire energy titans, the Koch brothers, who also fund Tea Party organizations and events, and by Fox News Network owner, Rupert Murdoch, whose network regularly packages its owner's re-

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actionary plutocratic agenda as "populist."

Their aim is nothing less than destroying the American middle class, which right now is being politically buoyed by strong public sector unions. Destroy the unions, and there is no organized force to stand up for the middle class and for the American dream of working a job, earning a comfortable salary and a secure pension, and retiring, all while serving the public good.

Of course destroying your middle class consumer/debtor base seems a bit insane, but unfettered greed is a pathological condition. The corporate aim in destroying the middle class is to collapse the wage floor under the American workforce, and being well on their way to doing that, they're now going in for the kill before a backlash unseats their cronies.

Unions also represent the only econom-

ic force large enough to counter corporate money in elections. Kill unions and you rid the nation of rhetorically competitive elections. This is your fight whether or not you belong to a union. The public sector contains the bulk of this nation's unionized professionals. Breaking their unions will be the deathblow to the union movement, which ironically, would come at a time when unions are rising as the backbones in democracy movements across the world. But this is also part of the corporate endgame strategy. Democracy is nothing more than an impedance to an unfettered corporate agenda. Break the unions and you break the most powerful supporters of democracy. **CT**

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Cairo in Wisconsin

Andy Kroll joins thousands of demonstrators eating Egyptian pizza in downtown Madison

The call reportedly arrived from Cairo. Pizza for the protesters, the voice said. It was Saturday, February 20th, and by then Ian's Pizza on State Street in Madison, Wisconsin, was overwhelmed. One employee had been assigned the sole task of answering the phone and taking down orders. And in they came, from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, from Morocco, Haiti, Turkey, Belgium, Uganda, China, New Zealand, and even a research station in Antarctica. More than 50 countries around the globe. Ian's couldn't make pizza fast enough, and the generosity of distant strangers with credit cards was paying for it all.

Those pizzas, of course, were heading for the Wisconsin state capitol, an elegant domed structure at the heart of this Midwestern college town. For nearly two weeks, tens of thousands of raucous, sleepless, grizzled, energized protesters have called the stately capitol building their home. As the police moved in to clear it out on Sunday, Feb 27, afternoon, it was still the pulsing heart of the largest labor protest in my lifetime, the focal point of rallies and concerts against a politically-charged piece of legislation proposed by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, a hard-right Republican. That bill, officially known as the Special Session Senate Bill 11,

would, among other things, eliminate collective bargaining rights for most of the state's public-sector unions, in effect eviscerating the unions themselves.

"Kill the bill!" the protesters chant en masse, day after day, while the drums pound and cowbells clang. "What's disgusting? Union busting!"

One World, One Pain

The spark for Wisconsin's protests came on February 11th. That was the day the Associated Press published a brief story quoting Walker as saying he would call in the National Guard to crack down on unruly workers upset that their bargaining rights were being stripped away. Labor and other left-leaning groups seized on Walker's incendiary threat, and within a week there were close to 70,000 protesters filling the streets of Madison.

Six thousand miles away, February 11th was an even more momentous day. Weary but jubilant protesters on the streets of Cairo, Alexandria, and other Egyptian cities celebrated the toppling of Hosni Mubarak, the autocrat who had ruled over them for more than 30 years and amassed billions in wealth at their expense. "We have brought down the regime," cheered the protesters in Cairo's Tahrir Square, the center of the Egyptian uprising. In calendar terms, the

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