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The Real Issues: A Wisconsin Update

by George Lakoff

The Wisconsin protests are about much more than budgets and unions. As I observed in "[What Conservatives Really Want](#)," the conservative story about budget deficits is a ruse to turn the country conservative in every area. Karl Rove and [Shep Smith](#) have made it clear on Fox: If the Wisconsin plan to kill the public employees' unions succeeds, then there will be little union money in the future to support democratic candidates. Conservatives will be effectively unopposed in raising campaign funding in most elections, including the presidential elections. This will mean a thoroughly conservative America in every issue area.

The media, [with few exceptions](#), is failing to get at the deeper issues.

Let's start with the case of the Lincoln legislators. As is well known about Lincoln, and as the *Political Wire* [reports](#),

On December 5, 1840, Democrats "proposed an early adjournment, knowing this would bring a speedy end to the State Bank. The Whigs tried to counter by leaving the capitol building before the vote, but the doors were locked. That's when Lincoln made his move. He headed for the second story, opened a window and jumped to the ground!"

Lincoln would be, and we all should be, proud that the Wisconsin state senators have courageously crossed the state line to Illinois to avoid a quorum in Wisconsin that would have a disastrous effect, not only on Wisconsin, but on America for the indefinite future.

Quorum rules are an inherent part of democracy. They are in the Wisconsin Constitution for a reason. When an extreme move by a legislative majority would be a disaster, patriotic legislators can, like Lincoln, refuse to allow the disaster if they have the power to stop it. That is their democratic duty, not only to their constituents, but to the nation.

That is why I think these legislators should be called the "Lincoln Legislators" as a term of honor. They understand that their courage is being called upon, not just in the name of collective bargaining rights, but in the name of protecting democracy from a total conservative takeover. The Lincoln story, and the greater good story, should be in the media every day. And Democrats nationwide should be hailing the courage, and vital importance, of those legislators.

Yet the media keeps reporting on them as "fleeing" and refusing to do their jobs. Where there is positive reporting, as on MSNBC's The Ed Show, it is only about defending unions and collective bargaining rights for working people.

The media -- and the Democrats -- also need to do a much better job on a sneaky conservative media strategy. The clearest example occurred in the *NY Times*. David Brooks, in his Feb. 21, 2011 column [wrote](#): "Private sector unions push against the interests of shareholders and management; public sector unions push against the interests of taxpayers." I turned on CNN that day and heard Anderson Cooper introduce the Wisconsin protest story as a battle between taxpayers and unions. These are massive distortions, but they are what conservatives want the public to believe.

The real issue is whether conservatives will get what they really want: the ability to turn the country conservative on every issue, legally and permanently. Eliminating the public sector unions could achieve that. Collective bargaining rights are the immediate issue, but they are symbolic of the real issue at stake. That is the story the media should be telling -- and that Democrats everywhere in America should be shouting out loud.

What is standing in the way of having the real story told? It is the frame of collective bargaining itself, which only points to the parties that are doing the bargaining and what they are bargaining over.

The real point of collective bargaining is the idea of fairness inherent in democracy. Without unions, large corporations have an unfair advantage in hiring individual workers: Workers have to take what is offered, a fair wage for work done or not. Unions help to even the playing field, enabling workers to have a fair chance against wealthy, powerful large organizations -- whether corporations or governments.

But public employees' unions, in bargaining with governments, are raising deeper issues in which wealthy corporations and individuals play a huge role. The public employees' unions are aware that the top one percent of Americans have more financial assets than the bottom 95 percent -- a staggering disproportion of wealth. The wealthy have, to a large extent, amassed that wealth through indirect contributions to them by governments -- governments build roads corporations use, fund schools that train their workers, subsidize their energy costs, do research they capitalize on, subsidize their access to resources, promote trade for them, and on and on.

Meanwhile, over the past three decades, while corporations and their investors have grown immensely richer on the public largesse, middle class workers have had no substantive wage increases, leaving them poorer and poorer. Those immensely

wealthy corporations and individuals have, through political contributions, have managed to rig our politics so that they pay back only an inadequate amount into the system that has enabled them to become wealthy.

The real targets of the public employees' unions are the wealthy free riders who, in a fair political economy, would be giving back more to the nation, and to the states and communities they function in.

That is the obvious half of what the Wisconsin protests are about. The other half concerns the rights of ordinary people in a democracy -- rights conservatives want to deny, whether gay rights, women's rights, immigrant rights, retirement rights, or the right to the best health a nation can provide to all its citizens. Unions, through their political contributions, support the basic freedoms, protections, and resources we all require to have a decent life and live in a civilized society. If those unions are destroyed, American life will become unrecognizable in a remarkably short time.

Democracy as we know it is at stake in the Wisconsin protests, not just budgets and unions.

Progressives are organizing rallies to "Save The American Dream." They are understating the case.

If Democrats are not talking out loud about these deeper issues, then they are, by their reticence and silence, helping conservatives destroy unions, defund the Democratic party, and take over the country.