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March 2011 Newsletter

Extra **American Values** **Campaign** Extra

WISCONSIN- THE FIGHT FOR DEMOCRACY

By David Blake

“Tell me what democracy looks like!” speaker after speaker called out. “This is what democracy looks like!” responded a crowd that seemed in excess of 100,000, massed around the Wisconsin State Capitol and for streets as far as the eye could see. In one of the most remarkable demonstrations this country has ever seen the people of Wisconsin captured the hearts and spirits of working people throughout this nation to demand that their fundamental right to organize, a right acquired through a century of struggle, not be taken away.

March 12, 2011, should be remembered as the day that Wisconsin’s working people said, “enough!” Enough to a war on the rights of working people. A right-wing governor, Scott Walker, financed by millionaires and billionaires, succeeded in ramming through a law virtually eliminating the right of public sector employees to collectively bargain. Saturday’s rally was the people’s response. Perhaps the protectors of corporate American won the

first battle, but the fight has just commenced. The assembled masses have risen and are shouting, “we will win this war!” People who wake up every morning to go off to work, who



work with dignity, and who for too long have slept while their incomes have declined, their pensions stolen, their working conditions deteriorated, have awakened. A critical mass has developed and it is time to say, “No more!”

My wife and I arrived in Madison early on Saturday

morning. It was a frigid day, and crowds had yet to gather. We walked into a coffee shop near the capitol and gathered with others who had arrived early. Within an hour crowds were starting to gather, and by 10:00 when a tractorcade of Wisconsin farmers began to drive through the streets, it was clear that this was going to be an extraordinary day. Tractor after tractor, farmers drove through growing crowds demonstrating their solidarity in the finest traditions of Wisconsin’s farmer-labor alliance. The crowd screamed “thank-you,” a common refrain through the day and the farmers in return thanked the throngs of protestors.

By noon, when a collection of farmers spoke to a crowd in front of the capitol, the number of protestors had swelled to a massive assemblage of humanity. Young and old, union and non-union, I don’t think that in all our years of demonstrating have I ever witnessed such a diverse outpouring of people gathered in solidarity.



We entered the capitol rotunda and there was a crowd assembled in a circle, with a Hyde-Park, open mike atmosphere. I went up to the microphone to thank the people of Wisconsin for the prairie fire they have ignited and for the inspiration they have provided from coast to coast. They, in turn, thanked us, for our solidarity in being there for their struggle. We all know, however, that this is not just their struggle. It is a struggle throughout this county against a concerted attempt to take this country away from us, to hand it over to a corporate plutocracy. We then left the rotunda and walked around the capitol and through the streets of the city. What was so profoundly moving was the spirit of the crowd. Exuberant, excited, passionate and determined. There was an enormous outpouring of people from every walk of life, with a recognition that Madison was on the front lines of the civil rights movement of our era, and that the stakes are far too big to even consider defeat.

This was a crowd not financed by corporate money, not sponsored by the Koch brothers. This was a gathering organized from the ground up. A grass roots action sponsored by a host of unions and

other progressive forces. The people were present not to hear from celebrities, though indeed there were plenty around. They were not gathered to hear speeches, though there were several very good ones. The people were here to say they would no longer be bullied by these failures of public service. There were people of all types of political persuasion. I spoke with one person who told me that he was a social conservative who had indeed voted for Governor Scott Walker on the basis of his conservative social beliefs. He promised that he would never again do so. He noted in impassioned tones, that never could he have believed that an elected governor would try to dismantle everything working people have fought for. There were farmers, steel workers, fire fighters, police officers, nurses and doctors, and of course educators. There was truly a spirit of solidarity that has rarely been witnessed before.



When the 14 State Senators, who had left the state to enable the people of Wisconsin to mobilize, gathered at the stage there was an ear-shattering and unified chant of "Thank you!" Thanks for giving the people the time to mobilize and prepare for battle. When

singers sang, "This land is your land" and "Solidarity Forever" it appeared as if all of Madison joined in, not only enjoying the music, but more so the message. There was a recognition that this outpouring of humanity on a frigid Saturday, as wonderful as it felt, only represented a chapter in the story that is now being written across this nation. There is now a concerted recall campaign to remove state Senators who voted against our interests; to recall the governor after a year of his tenure. There is discussion of selective general strikes. Whatever strategy unfolds however, there was a clear understanding that this is a battle to important to abandon. It is a battle for the heart and soul of this country. It is a battle to defend the last defense we have against the erosion of democracy. Wisconsin is leading the way for all of us. We are indebted to them for starting a fire, and the best way we can repay them is by fighting the battle to our own turf as well. Whether it is in Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana or Michigan, the issues are the same, the battle is the same. We must stop the assault on working people. Now is the time to stand up and speak out, if we fail to do sit now, it might be too late to stem the tide against us. As the demonstrators began to leave at the end of a glorious day there was no feeling of remorse, no belief that the battle was finished. Rather, there was a spirit of renewal, of determination, that enveloped us all. This was a call to action; to reclaim our nation. A sleeping giant has been awakened, and just in time. "Tell me what democracy looks like?" We owe it to Wisconsin, we owe it to ourselves, to show the world, "This is what democracy looks like!"

