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Canada's Pulse

Dissing the union advantage

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The Vector Poll™

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Republican governors in Wisconsin, Ohio, New Jersey and other states have introduced a menu of laws to restrict what public sector unions can negotiate, end the dues checkoff from paycheques and force unions to sign their members every year to keep the right to represent them. The rash of anti-union legislation has inspired a nationwide union fight-back effort.

Richard Trumka, the president of the nation's major house of labour, the AFL-CIO, says, "We've never seen the incredible solidarity that we're seeing right now. People are giving us another look. They're saying, 'We support collective bargaining.'"

Labour historian William Powell Jones, at the University of Wisconsin, told the *New York Times*, "the winning side here will be emboldened elsewhere."

Where does the public stand? A big majority (77%) of Americans say "public employees who belong to a union and work for state government, city government, or a school district should have the same right to bargain when it comes to their health care, pension and other benefits as employees who belong to a union and work for private companies" (NBC News/*Wall Street Journal* poll, Feb. 24-28).

While Americans don't want public employees to lose their right to bargain, they want them to sacrifice. A 42% plurality, for example, says American public employees are paid too much, according to a Feb. 24-28 Quinnipiac University Poll. Just 15% say too little, and 35% say public employees are paid about right (8% are unsure).

The U.S. public sector has become a union redoubt in an increasingly non-union economy as private sector unions have suffered membership declines from mass layoffs in manufacturing and from union-cleansing tactics that keep major sectors of the economy union-free.

Budget deficits have given Republican governors an excuse to settle scores with their state workers' unions, which generally support Democrats. Some 63% in the Quinnipiac poll say to reduce state budget deficits they support making public employees "pay more for their benefits and retirement programs." By 45% to 42% Americans support limiting collective bargaining for public employees "in order to reduce state budget deficits."

Nonetheless, Americans view the attempt by Wisconsin's governor to wreck public employee bargaining rights as unfair. In a Pew Research Center poll (Feb. 24-27), 42% said they side more with the public employee unions in Wisconsin than with the governor (31%). Another 9% said neither while 18% had no opinion.

The right wing has succeeded in concealing its anti-union agenda behind deficit-fighting plans. A CBC News-*New York Times* poll (Feb. 24-27) found 45% saying "in general, when governors and state legislators try to reduce the benefits of public employees they are doing this mostly to reduce state budget deficits" while 41% disagreed, saying it's "mostly to weaken the power of unions" (14% had no opinion).

In this climate there is no room to argue that deficits are temporary, necessary and not really all that bad providing the money states borrow pays for essential services such as public protection, education, health, clean air and safe water. Republicans have convinced many voters that deficits are the result of overpaid public employees and overly generous public sector pension plans.

Nevertheless, in the CBS News/*New York Times* poll, 56% across the country opposed cutting public employees' pay or benefits "in order to reduce state budget deficits," while 37% were in favour (7% were unsure).

The right-wing governors have focused on state employees' pension benefits as unaffordable when states are having trouble balancing their books. But because the public likes firefighters, police officers and teachers, there is no strong appetite to punish these public employees. In the CBS poll, 49% said police officers and firefighters should be able to retire after 25 years of service and begin collecting pensions, "even if they are in their forties or fifties." Some 44% said they should have to be "older than that" to collect pensions "regardless of the number of years they have served." And 49% said "teachers should be able to retire after a set period of service" and begin collecting pensions "even if they are younger than 65" (46% said no).

The U.S. right wing is taking advantage of a weak union brand. In the Feb. 24-27 CBS News poll, opinion toward unions was 33% favourable, 25% unfavourable, with 19% unsure and 20% saying they didn't know enough to say one way or the other. Union approval is down noticeably from years ago.

Last August a slim 52% majority of Americans said they approve of unions, the second lowest approval rating in Gallup's 70-year history of the trend, behind only the 2009 level of 48%.

Gallup analysts speculated that "with many Americans out of work and struggling to find work," the union mission "may not seem fair" compared with times "when jobs are more plentiful." In the U.S. the all-time high of 75% approval was in 1953 and 1957. In Canada 60% say they approve of unions (according to the Vector Poll™), a level that's been stable for a decade.

The CBS News poll found that Americans generally recognize their unions are weaker than years ago. Some 37% today say unions have too much influence, 29% the right amount and 19% too little. Thirty years ago 60% said unions had too much influence.

Union leaders were encouraged by the CBS poll, where 60% of the public opposed taking away “some of the collective bargaining rights” of public employee unions (33% were in favour, 7% unsure).

A Gallup Poll for *USA Today* had the same result: 61% opposed a bill in their state like Wisconsin’s “that would take away some of the collective bargaining rights of most public employee unions, including the state teachers' union.” In the same poll 44% favoured reducing state workers’ pay or benefits to reduce budget deficits while 53% were opposed.

Just as Canadians do, Americans distinguish between public employees and public employee unions, and are more affectionate to the former than the latter. In the U.S., according to the Gallup Poll (conducted Feb. 21), 46% said “in states in which government workers belong to unions” the unions “are generally more harmful to those states” – 45% said more helpful.

The unions’ challenge is that Americans are deeply ambivalent about unions. The Pew poll (Feb. 2-7) found 43% said their first reaction is to side with businesses “when you hear of a disagreement between labor unions and businesses,” 40% said they side with unions (4% said neither, 6% depends and 8% had no opinion).

In a disagreement “between state or local governments and unions that represent government workers,” 44% said their first reaction is to side with unions, 38% with governments (which may indicate Americans’ antipathy toward government as much as support for government workers). In contrast, in a 1999 Gallup poll in the U.S. 45% said “in labour disputes of the last two or three years” their sympathies “in general” had been on the side of unions, 37% on the side of the companies.

Most unions as we know them today were born as the world emerged from the Depression eight decades ago. Unions have not enjoyed a similar improvement in their image or membership numbers despite the recent deep recession.

For many years unions in America, and Canada, too, have bragged about the union advantage, the higher pay and better benefits union members enjoy compared with non-union employees in comparable jobs.

What the unions said and what the public heard are not the same, however. Unions hoped the advantage would inspire non-union employees to want unions. Non-union employees and other people heard a different message and grew resentful instead of thankful.

Collective bargaining in Canada enjoys constitutional protection. But if the Republican governors succeed it will encourage Canadian right-wing politicians to go after union rights in the same way. Ontario's provincial government just cancelled strike rights for Toronto bus and subway operators with almost no public or union protests.

A good reputation is a kind of Teflon coating against foes, and unions devote too little attention to their reputation. Every union has safety representatives, communications staff, lawyers and researchers. But none has an officer or employee devoted to guarding the union's brand. The debate over union rights in America shows that reputation matters. Whether it's budget deficits or strike rights, it's hard to win union-backed public policy if the public doesn't back unions.

Marc Zwelling is founder of the Vector Poll™ (www.vectorresearch.com).