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Public Workers and their Unions Endure Constant "Austerity" Attack Left Margin By Carl Bloice BC Editorial Board

It never ceases to amaze me how some people who are rich and famous - especially those with access to major newspaper opinion pages - are so quick to declare that others, who are neither, should have to suffer pain.

Take, for instance, the ubiquitous David Brooks. Back at the start of the year when Scott Walker began to go after the Wisconsin's public workers in earnest, the *Times* columnist criticized the Republican governor for excluding police and firefighters from his attack. But on the larger issue, Brooks defended Walker and his party legislators saying they "were doing exactly what they told voters they would do." He went on to decry public workers as inhabiting "workplaces where personnel decisions are made on the basis of seniority, not merit" and where there is "little relationship between excellence and reward, which leads to resentment among taxpayers who don't have that luxury."

"Getting state and federal budgets under control will take decades," wrote Brooks February 21. "It will require varied, multipronged approaches, supported by broad and shifting coalitions. It's really important that we establish an unwritten austerity constitution: a set of practices that will help us cut effectively now and in the future.

"The foundation of this unwritten constitution has to be this principle: make everybody hurt. The cuts have to be spread more or less equitably among as many groups as possible." Brooks called upon

Walker "and the debt fighters everywhere to think of themselves as founding fathers of austerity."

"They are not only balancing budgets, they are setting precedent for a process that will last decades. By their example, they have to create habits that diverse majorities can respect and embrace. The process has to be balanced. It has to make everybody hurt."

Of course, a lot depends on what you mean by "everybody." It's doubtful, Brooks has in mind spreading the pain to upper middle class suburban Montgomery County, Maryland where he and his wife have a four-bedroom, 4,600-square-foot house.

Now, four months later, with the defeat of the labor-led effort to recall Walker, the Austarians, with Brooks' encouragement, have won a major battle and the unions representing teachers, nurses, school crossing guards, park rangers, cops and bridge toll takers are politically on the defensive. Lest anyone think the attack on public worker unions is merely a Republican plot we should be clear: it's all too often a bipartisan effort.

Don't ask me why *Reuters* decided to go after financier Steven Rattner's opinion after the outcome of the convention and leadership election of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees union (AFSCME). Maybe he was just handy. But he wasn't reticent: "Even some Democrats, like Steve Rattner, the former head of the U.S. government's auto task force who currently manages the personal investments of New York City's mayor Michael Bloomberg, think public sector workers need to share more of the pain from the downturn and slow-motion recovery," the news agency said.

"Their private sector counterparts have taken major pain as part of this economic downturn and they have for the most part not taken any," Rattner told *Reuters*. "But they're going to have to take some pain and I think there ought to be a way to do it peacefully and fairly." It's nice to know Rattner doesn't think limiting the remuneration and job security of public workers need involve violence, but fairness is another matter.

The idea that public workers haven't felt the pain of the recent economic havoc is ludicrous. Government employment - federal, state, and local - has fallen by over 600,000 since the spring of 2009.

Rattner used to be a reporter at the *New York Times* and his writing still appears there from time to time, and at the *Financial Times* as well. However, in the early eighties he made a career change and spent two decades as an investment banker at Lehman Brothers, Morgan Stanley, and Lazard Freres & Co. He was one of four founders of the private equity and hedge fund related Quadrangle Group that eventually came to be worth \$6 billion. "I have the best wife in the world; I have four wonderful children; everybody is healthy; we're financially secure; and nothing else matters," he was quoted as saying at one point. His wife, Maureen White, also an investment banker, was for five years finance chair of the Democratic National Committee. "Rattner and his wife are known for throwing lavish parties in their Manhattan apartment," said *Time* magazine.

"The crossing guards, snow-plow operators and librarians who make up the membership of the AFSCME pushed back during their convention this week," said *Reuters* June 22.

Last week, delegates to AFSCME's 75th anniversary convention elected what the union referred to as a "new leadership team" of Lee Saunders as president and Laura Reyes as secretary-treasurer. Saunders, a former labor economist and long time African American union activist, served previously as the union's secretary-treasurer and as executive assistant to outgoing president Gerald McEntee. Reyes, an AFSCME international vice president, joined UDW Homecare Providers Union/AFSCME Local 3930 in California in 2002. She is the first woman to be elected to secretary-treasurer.

"We will dig deep into every state, every city to organize new workers from every sector," Reyes said. "Our reason for organizing is not just to collect more dues, or boast higher numbers. Our reason for organizing is our reason for being: to give every worker a fair shot in a world where the decks are stacked against us."

"When we enter into bargaining, our people understand that they don't want to tear apart the community. They're part of the community," Saunders told the convention delegates. "But we don't want things shoved down our throats. We don't want the collective bargaining process ignored."

"We know that Wall Street and their allies are engaged in an all-out assault against our members and the services we provide," Saunders said upon assuming his new post. "We are united in our commitment to stand up for the men and women who care for America's children,

nurse the sick, plow our streets, collect the household trash and guard our prisons. Our members are a cross-section of America, not some elite group as our opponents try to claim. We are energized and ready for the battles ahead."

It looks like it is going to be quite a battle. The David Brooks and Steven Rattners, purveyors of austerity US-style, have rich and powerful allies on the right and in the center. Their idea of enforcing "shared sacrifice" is to turn the screws on the people that deliver our mail, clean our streets, guard our neighborhoods and care for the sick and indigent, while those who already have a lot get more.

What we are dealing with here is an effort to undermine public employee unions (having already delivered serious blows to labor in the private sector), employing divide-and-rule tactics in an attempt to stir resentment in the ranks of workers in the private sector who - unprotected by unions - face continual assaults on their living standards and economic security, and an effort to deflect attention from the nation's growing economic inequality. In such a situation it is true that labor's leaders and strategist are obliged to shape up their strategies and find creative tactics to confront this assault. It is equally beholden on those outside organized labor - the rest of us in the 99 percent - to recognize that our fate is tied up with these workers and how this all plays out.

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