

# The BLACK C o M M e n t a t o r

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## **Where Is Our Priority? The Other Side of the Tracks By Perry Redd BC Columnist**

America is insane. The American people are the most wishy-washy, forked-tongued, easily-mislead people on earth. The NFL referee strike/lockout is over. Football is supposedly, back to normal. That employee-employer tug-of-war seemed to incense this country and the general public was glad to give the refs what they wanted. Remember just months ago, we lambasted anyone who supported unions.

We've got collective amnesia. We supported the negotiations of the referees union, though we seemingly want to do away with collective bargaining for public servants. Just one week and a half ago, another strike was going on and people blasted the employees in that battle - Chicago teachers. And a year before that, Wisconsin civil servants went on strike and they too were cast as villains - by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker and pro-corporate conservatives, who both unashamedly supported the striking referees...all for the sake of the game.

The referees weren't after the money (although money ain't the worse thing for which they could've gone on strike), nor were Chicago's teachers - even though their contract restricted them, by law, from striking over any other issue (who settled on *that* one?). Wisconsin public employees weren't after money either.

The referees were able to keep their pensions - through 2016. However, don't be fooled; pensions *are* about money. Head coaches and players had also tried in vain for pension guarantees; they don't

have a pension plan anymore. But the referees made it happen. So what's the difference?

The referees union was seeking improved salaries, retirement benefits and other logistical issues for the part-time officials. The NFL owners proposed a pension freeze in exchange for a higher 401(k) match, and also wanted to hire 21 more officials to improve the quality of officiating. The union balked, fearing the NFL's proposal would lead to job loss, as well as a reduction in overall compensation. Hopefully, the referee's ridiculously enormous pay raise will keep up with the cost of living. I can't think of another American worker (aside from a corporate CEO) who gets that kind of raise.

When the smoke cleared, football fans cheered and even Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker applauded the end of the strike - with the union winning intact. How bogus of him! He spent a year trying to destroy the teachers' union! That's the contradiction of conservatives. South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham equated the Chicago teachers with "thugs." What? You know he didn't use that language concerning the referees! Oh no...that would have been unpatriotic! What a coward...

On the other hand, last year in Wisconsin, municipal employees sought to uphold collective bargaining rights - to continue to bargain as a group, as a union - for wages and work conditions. Their strike ended with their rights being stripped, followed by a recall election of the Governor in which he barely hung on to his seat. In effect, Wisconsin state workers lost some of their power, even though courts upheld their collective bargaining rights. Yet, their rights and profession remain under assault by the Governor.

Likewise, through collective bargaining, the Chicago teachers' pay deal calls for an average raise of 17.6% over four years...that's large but down from the 30% initially sought by their union. By the way, the teachers' primary dissatisfaction wasn't about money but working conditions. They were happy to secure concessions limiting a school reform program they believed would harm students and cost teachers' jobs. Attackers and protractors openly criticized the teachers for using their collective bargaining rights, as did Wisconsin workers, but I didn't hear that same sharp criticism of the referees - who also used their collective bargaining rights! We've got our priorities messed up!

It's been reported that 70,000 people wrote letters in support of getting the referees back to work. But for 350,000 children in

Chicago's school system, public figures failed to stand up for teachers - who sit with those 350,000 school-aged children everyday! Teachers are in session over 200 days a year. Teachers essentially provide child protective service for our most important resource - our children. Contrast that with NFL referees who work only 18 days a year! Damn! You do the math...

Both fans and sports analysts heaped mounds of trash-talk against replacement referees with intensifying criticism that erupted following the officiating debacle during "Monday Night Football," when the Seattle [Seahawks defeated the Green Bay Packers, 14-12](#). But in the end, the love affair resumes between the professional refs and their fans. What about our teachers? What about our public sector workers?

Perhaps, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker likened football to air safety when he interjected himself into the strike *after* the referee's "bad call." He showed support for the unionized referees, but ignored, ridiculed, and then lambasted the unionized public servants of his state. Obviously, he's a football fan with no love lost on civil servants - the teachers and other state agency workers on whom he depends for the functioning of his state. Let's learn a lesson from this episode and get our priorities straight. Support unions and the workers unions represent. They work to serve you.

**BlackCommentator.com** Columnist, Perry Redd, is the former Executive Director of the workers rights advocacy, Sincere Seven, and author of the on-line commentary, "[The Other Side of the Tracks](#)." He is the host of the internet-based talk radio show, *Socially Speaking in Washington, DC*. Click [here](#) to contact Mr. Redd.



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