

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

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## **The GOP War On Workers Is Traditional... And Going Well**

**Solidarity America  
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BC Columnist**

For anyone who thinks that the current Republican war on workers, especially public workers, is anything new, a quick look at recent history should disabuse that thought and further show that this war has been a long time in the making and in its conduct.

It's not necessary to go back to the Robber Barons of more than a century ago to see the common threads that run through this continual war. Those were times when workers did not have much of a defense, except for their actual bodies up against the goons and thugs of both the companies and the judges, politicians, and government officials who backed them. No, this more recent war could be seen as starting a little more than three decades ago, about 1980.

There are abundant historical documents that tell us employers have always been willing to spend endless amounts of money to defeat any effort by workers to improve their lot, including wages, health and safety on the job, benefits, working conditions in general, health care, and pensions. Since the passage of the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) in the mid-1930s, disputes repeatedly have arisen between the workers and their employers, which could have been settled without great expense, but there was no settlement.

Principally, it was because the employer's desire was to prove himself to be more powerful than the collective intent and voice of the workers. All of this would have been a moot point, if workers had not been provided their right to collectively bargain for wages, benefits,

working conditions, and other issues, by the NLRA. The wonder of this is that it took so long in the history of the U.S.A. for workers to be recognized as participants in this experiment of a democratic republic. But then, we had had slavery for hundreds of years and we were rather accustomed to the concept.

A case in point in our more recent history is the 19-month-long Detroit News-Detroit Free Press strike of the mid 1990s. In a new book on the subject, the author, Chris Rhomberg, estimated that newspaper giants Gannett and Knight Ridder spent \$130 million to beat 2,500 workers in the various unions. Assuming that his numbers are correct, a quick calculation shows that the corporate owners spent about \$52,000 per worker to attain the victory and render the unions virtually powerless to effectively represent the workers in any way...to this day.

The book is titled, "The Broken Table," and is subtitled, "The Detroit Newspaper Strike and the State of American Labor." In it, Rhomberg uses the long newspaper strike to illustrate the decline of organized labor over a period of years, but principally during the decline of the strike as a tool of equalization of the power in the workplace from the 1970s, on to the present.

Strikes have all but disappeared in the U.S. in the past 30 years, until in 2012, there have been literally, just a few strikes each recent year in which more than 100 workers have been involved. Some analyses have held that the decline of strikes has been largely because of the instability of industry, the globalization of the economy, and such things in the national economy as corporate mergers and takeovers. But there is more at work here than just a dwindling manufacturing base.

Lawsuits against unions, laws that curb or restrict worker activities in defense of their work and their livelihoods, and politicians of every stripe hostile to the idea of workers joining together in unions to protect their jobs, families, and communities have all played a part in decreasing the power of workers in the economic sphere. Many politicians would like to see a return to the good old days, when workers attempting to form unions could be, and were, charged with conspiracy, mostly conspiracy in restraint of trade.

Little has it ever mattered that corporations (a hundred years ago, it was the Robber Barons) could corner markets, restrain trade, monopolize, defraud the people, and make huge profits selling things that did not work or worked badly, or were shoddily made. Or, they plundered entire regions for their natural resources, without any benefit to the people who lived in the plundered places. These conditions were acceptable to the powers, public and private. What

was not acceptable was workers joining together and demanding justice in their workplaces and in the economy in general, and the fight, mostly one-sided, has gone on for a hundred years or more.

In Detroit, in 1995 (the year the strike started), two giant newspaper companies, Gannett and Knight Ridder, were operating under what was called a joint operating agreement (JOA), in which they could combine some aspects of the industry (printing and advertising, for example), while keeping the editorial departments separate and independent. At least, that was the theory, and it required court supervision of the agreement. After the unions were defeated, a handful of the 2,500 members of the striking unions went back to work and the rest, presumably, found jobs elsewhere.

The two companies, however, showed how unimportant their Detroit properties were to their journalistic endeavors. They sold out to a "media" company, which started out life in Detroit with hundreds of thousands fewer subscribers and readers. It was partly because of the strike, but it also could have been partly a symptom of the state of the newspaper industry in the U.S., which now has to deal with a populace who don't read newspapers, but get news and "information" from various outlets on the Internet.

In reality, the disdain shown for journalistic integrity by the two corporations was superseded by the disdain, contempt, really, for all of the workers involved, as well as their communities. The main goal of the companies was to defeat the workers in all their efforts to retain any semblance of dignity and respect. The way to do that was to destroy their unions and that's what they did.

In that, Gannett and Knight Ridder were not alone in the list of giant companies of Corporate America who had destroyed or effectively destroyed unions in the waning years of the 20th Century. They had plenty of company. To name just a few, there were International Paper, which had strikes or lockouts at four of their mills at once in 1987; there was the Pittston coal strike of 1989-90, and the Ravenswood aluminum plant in Ravenswood, West Virginia, a strike that started on Oct. 31, 1990.

And, there were three strikes or lockouts in Decatur, Illinois, at Caterpillar (giant construction equipment), Bridgestone/Firestone (tires), and Staley (sugar for the soft drink industry). The situation was so bad there, the city was called the "War Zone" for years after the start of the conflict.

In all of these and many more, the employer could have settled the strike for a fraction of the cost of the strikes and lockouts, but it was

about more than money. If there was scorched earth policy, it was to burn the very concept of unions out of the minds of the workers who aspire to decent wages, benefits, pensions, and working conditions. Gone was the social compact, that tenuous agreement in America between capital and labor that allowed unions to exist, as long as they didn't get too impertinent.

In the past several years and, especially during the first term of President Obama, the Republicans, believing that they have vanquished unions in the private sector, have trained their guns on the workers in the public sector. The most egregious example is the action of Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin and his attempt to eliminate collective bargaining for most public workers. He survived a recall election on that issue, but lost some ground, when a court ruled that he could not do what he intended. But he and other Republicans have promised to continue their war on public workers. They'll come back and try to eliminate collective bargaining and, if possible, eliminate the unions.

In this, they have the support of some of the richest men and women on the planet. They can count on the financial support of billionaires like the Koch brothers, owners of Koch Industries, one of the most notorious polluters of the environment. They, and thousands like them, stand ready to spend tens of millions of their own money (sometimes \$100 million at a time, as in the current presidential election) to get laws passed that will curb the power of the people to engage in the democratic process, on the job and in the general electoral system.

Walker is not the only politician who is in the pocket of the rich and powerful and the Koch brothers are not the only rich men who are polluting our democratic system with their money. And, Wisconsin is not the only state aiming to curb the rights of workers to organize themselves into unions.

Corporate America and the 1 percent feel that they have taken out the private sector unions and now only have to deal a mortal blow to the public sector unions and they will have eliminated organized labor, the only real impediment to their complete takeover of the economy and the rest of what has been a free society. Unionized workers are the hope for saving the country from such a fate. This struggle is not about money in a contract. It's about whether the U.S.A. becomes a nation of (a few) haves and (lots of) have-nots.

If they stick together, in solidarity, America's workers can win this one.

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