



# Continuing the fight for freedom

By **Gerald W. McEntee** Feb. 23, 2011

The tens of thousands of Wisconsinites who have marched and protested at the state Capitol and throughout the state this past week are American heroes. It is not often in this country that thousands gather to fight for the dignity and the rights of their fellow citizens. Yet for days now, workers and their families, students and retirees, clergy and businessmen, LGBT activists and veterans have joined together to have their voices heard. The people of the Badger State are making history happen.

The vast crowds are demonstrating their determination to fight for the God-given right of workers to have a voice on the job. They are fighting for the American values of freedom, fairness and the fundamental right of workers to speak, organize and negotiate for a better life. They are waging a battle that has been waged by workers for generations in nations across the globe, a battle for the right to participate fully in the life of their community and country and to have their voices heard.

Through their efforts, the country is now seeing more clearly the radical right-wing effort to destroy the power of working men and women. In Wisconsin, Ohio, Indiana, Florida, New Hampshire and other states, newly elected governors are attempting to quickly and quietly overturn decades of public employee collective bargaining. Their dangerous and radical plans are now exposed to the watching nation.

This broad-based opposition to Gov. Scott Walker's effort to ram extreme policies into law is a reminder of the importance of labor unions in the life of all democracies. There is a reason authoritarian regimes - of both the right and left - seek to destroy unions when they take power.

The record of history is clear on this. From the Bolsheviks of the last century to the Iranian mullahs today, authoritarian regimes have tried to destroy independent labor unions. They knew that workers organized into free and democratic unions pose a threat to those who seek to rule without opposition or dissent.

Remember the great Lech Walesa, the charismatic Polish electrician, who in the early 1980s

led the Solidarity trade union in a strike that began in the Lenin Shipyards of Gdansk. Within days, the union's brave action was emulated throughout Poland. Then, working men and women took to the streets throughout the Soviet Bloc. Walesa's message spread through Eastern Europe and ended with the crumbling of the Iron Curtain.

Pope John Paul II shared Walesa's belief in the importance of labor unions. When he traveled to a still captive Poland after his election to the papacy, he embraced Walesa and urged the workers to stand up for their rights. Before a crowd of more than a million of his beloved countrymen and women, the Holy Father had a simple message: "You are men. You have dignity. Don't crawl on your bellies."

The demonstrators in Wisconsin understand in their hearts what Pope John Paul II was saying. I was in Madison last week and will never forget the determination of the crowd I addressed. They know that the defense of the rights of workers to organize is at heart a moral issue. They will not be silent in the face of a grave injustice. They know that all of us are stronger when our fellow citizens stand up for workers and their rights. They know that attacks on unions and the freedom of working people are an assault on the values that ennoble humanity and strengthen democracy.

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