Introduction to Are Unions Still Relevant?: At Issue

Are Unions Still Relevant?, 2013

In 2012, Wisconsin voters held an election to recall, or replace, Governor Scott Walker. Walker, a Republican, was elected in 2010. He then moved to cut the benefits of public sector workers and to end the union's ability to bargain collectively. Wisconsin law allows voters to petition for a recall, and the unions and the Democratic party organized a massive and successful petition drive to unseat Walker. However, in the election, Walker was victorious and retained his seat, defeating Democrat Tom Barrett, the current mayor of Milwaukee.

Walker's reelection was seen as a serious defeat for unions, particularly public sector unions. Many commenters argued that it signaled the beginning of the end of union power as a political force. For example, Governor Mitch Daniels of Indiana, who has also moved to restrict public sector unions, spoke approvingly of the results in a June 10, 2012, interview with Fox News. Daniels said that the vote showed that “voters are seeing the fundamental unfairness of government becoming its own special interest”—which is what results, he argued, when public workers have their own unions. Similarly, Charles Krauthammer, writing in the June 7, 2012, issue of The Washington Post, predicted that the recall election “will be remembered as the beginning of the long decline of the public-sector union.” He added that the unions had used their collective bargaining power to take control of government policy, sidelining the electorate and bankrupting local governments.

Other commenters argued that the unions had been damaged but not destroyed. Aaron Blake, writing in the June 11, 2012, Washington Post, said that public sector unions are definitely weakening. As evidence, he pointed to polls showing support for unions dropping from 72 percent approval in 1936 to about 60 percent in 2007. Blake also noted that union membership is dropping. Still, Blake argued, “The fact that unions still have the support of at least half the American people is hardly insignificant,” and suggested that unions will survive in some form.

T.S. Weidler, an opponent of public sector unions, reached a similar conclusion for somewhat different reasons in the June 13, 2012, issue of American Thinker. Weidler maintained that the law supports labor unions by granting them tax exempt status, rather than taxing them at the rate of corporations. He argued that unions will always have huge amounts of money and will always be a major political force, as long as the tax laws protect them. “[L]abor unions have more money than Wisconsin has,” he stated. “They are not afraid of Scott Walker. They will not wither up and die anytime soon.”

On the other hand, Greg Sargent writing in the June 5, 2012, Washington Post, contended that the law has seriously weakened unions rather than strengthening them. In particular, Sargent singled out the Citizens United Supreme Court decision of 2010, in which the Supreme Court struck down many campaign finance laws that put limitations on corporations and other large donors. As a result of that decision, Sargent said, corporations and individual wealthy donors, many of them from outside Wisconsin, outspent unions by eight to one. Sargent quotes Michelle Ringuette, an official with the American Federation of Teachers, who said,
"It's pretty clear that the voices of ordinary citizens are at permanent risk of being drowned out by uninhibited corporate spending."

Despite the defeat, some commentators remained hopeful about the future of unions. In an interview with National Public Radio's Robert Siegel on June 6, 2012, Thea Lee, deputy chief of staff of the AFL-CIO, said that while the Wisconsin result was "disappointing," it was "only the beginning of a long battle." She argued that the recall election and the outcry against Walker's policies would make Republican governors think twice before taking on public sector unions in the future. She also pointed to a simultaneous successful recall election for the Wisconsin Senate, which flipped the balance of power in the Senate from Republican to Democrat. "That's a huge victory for the working families," Lee argued, "and that means that Governor Walker's agenda is going to be slowed down pretty dramatically." She added, "if you look at Governor Walker, he spent $50 million to barely hold on to his job, and he lost control of the state Senate. So in that sense, it doesn't seem like a resounding victory for him."

The remainder of this book will look at other arguments concerning the relevance of unions, touching on issues such as globalization, public sector unions, teachers' unions, and right-to-work laws. Different authors will provide contrasting viewpoints about whether unions will, and whether they should, continue to be an important force in the United States.

Further Readings

Books


Periodicals and Internet Sources


