

Time for second thoughts?

A backlash against Republican attacks may be under way

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AP Walker may have overreached

IT IS hard to get away from the subject of union rights in the Midwest these days. Protesters agitating against moves to curb them could be heard booing and chanting throughout the “state-of-the-state” speech delivered this week by John Kasich, the new Republican governor of Ohio. In nearby Wisconsin, the also-new Republican governor is under heavy fire for having, on March 9th, used a procedural dodge to force through a bill that will strip public-sector unions of their right to collective bargaining: Democratic state senators had tried to frustrate him by fleeing across the state line to Illinois. In Indiana, the state legislature is paralysed too, after its own Democratic flight. Both sides see ramifications for national politics—but do not agree, naturally, on what they will be.

Unions argue that the hullabaloo has done wonders for their cause. “We’ve never seen the incredible solidarity that we’re seeing right now,” said Richard Trumka, the head of the AFL-CIO, America’s main umbrella group for unions, earlier this month. But the union’s foes say much the same thing. Tim Phillips, the boss of Americans for Prosperity, a small-government pressure group, says that he and his colleagues encountered enthusiastic crowds everywhere they went during a 12-city tour of Wisconsin in support of the proposed checks on the state’s public-sector unions.

Both sides could be right, points out Andy Downs of IPFW, a university in Indiana, in that both may be rallying those already sympathetic to their cause. But the true test of the row’s impact, in his view, is the response of moderate, independent voters. In that respect, most polling suggests that Democrats fighting the erosion of union rights have an advantage over the Republicans advocating it. Voters seem to dislike the idea of depriving public-sector unions of collective-bargaining rights, as the Republican governor of Indiana has already done and his counterparts in Ohio and Wisconsin are proposing. Although they tend to support the idea of cutting benefits for government employees, that stance does not appear to rest on a broader animosity towards public-sector unions, and certainly not towards the teachers, police, and firemen they represent.

Scott Walker, the governor of Wisconsin, has seen his ratings fall since the uproar in his state began, especially among independents. Some of his fellow Republicans in the legislature are beginning to edge away from his insistence that scrapping collective bargaining for state workers is non-negotiable. By the same token, proponents of a similar move in Ohio had to turf two reluctant Republicans out of the relevant committees in the state Senate to secure its passage. In Indiana, Mitch Daniels, the governor, who is thought to have presidential ambitions, has asked the legislature to put off consideration of a bill that would end mandatory collection of union dues from pay-cheques.

Amy Hanauer of Policy Matters Ohio, a left-leaning think-tank, sees hope for Democrats in all this. Support for the party among working-class voters has been unreliable in recent years, she says, thanks in part to their conservative stance on social issues. By contrast, union rights, she believes, are a subject on which Democrats and the working class can agree. It was a plunge in support among the white working class, along with low turnout among youth and minorities, which earned the Democrats their drubbing throughout the Midwest at last year's mid-term elections. The current furore should help reverse both trends, she thinks. That, in turn, could improve Barack Obama's chances in a clump of states critical to his re-election.

But Mr Downs of IPFW is more cautious. Voters, he says want to see the melodrama end. It is not yet clear how the Democrats in Wisconsin will respond to Mr Walker's latest move. But if their party, there and elsewhere, is seen to be the main obstacle to agreement, their defence of the unions could backfire. Midwesterners are looking forward to a change of subject.