

CAFE CULTURE

## The Wisconsin Protests: Cairo on the Isthmus?

By [Anna Paretskaya](#), February 19th, 2011

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What started as a stunt by a group of University of Wisconsin-Madison students to deliver a few hundred “Valentine’s Day” cards from students, staff, and faculty to Governor Scott Walker asking him not to slash the university budget has now become national news: close to 100,000 Wisconsinites have come to the State Capitol in Madison over the past four days to protest the so-called “budget repair” bill, effectively occupying the building since Tuesday, diverting traffic from the streets around the Capitol, and hindering Madison’s recent, but beloved tradition, the Winter Festival, that was to take place in downtown’s isthmus area this weekend despite unusually warm temperatures.

On Tuesday, when state legislature’s finance committee was to take up the discussion of the governor’s bill, thousands of people from all over the state descended on the Capitol to lobby against it. At the 17-hour-long committee hearing—a “citizen filibuster,” as one speaker dubbed it—hundreds of Wisconsin residents spoke, nearly all against the bill, and scores expressed dismay at the governor’s attempt to take away the right of 175,000 Wisconsin’s public sector employees to collectively bargain. It wasn’t only union activists, Madison’s aging hippies, and liberal university professors, who waited for up to seven hours to make their two-minute statement before the committee. Amid nurses and teamsters and teacher aides were several self-described Reaganites, fiscal conservatives, and Republicans (or newly ex-Republicans) who were just as distraught by the governor’s heavy-handedness. The UW-Madison’s teaching assistants’ union ([TAA](#)), which has been representing graduate employees for the past 40 years, expressed the prevailing sentiment best: “This bill is an affront to democracy on two important levels. First, it proposes to completely eliminate the fundamental human right of fair representation and voice in determining workplace conditions. Second, the process for the passage of this bill has been shamefully undemocratic.” The governor of the state that prides itself on transparency and integrity of the political process, referred to here as “The Wisconsin Idea,” wanted the legislature to pass the bill within a week of its introduction, not giving the public much time to weigh in, nor for the elected representatives a chance to debate amendments.



Most of the rally chants and handmade posters that now adorn the hallways of the Capitol are about democracy, solidarity, government accountability, and unions, not so much about pay cuts or benefit reductions (although no doubt all working families in Wisconsin are concerned about those too). In the 1930s, Wisconsin was a birthplace of one of the largest public-employee unions in the country, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and the first state to pass a comprehensive collective bargaining law some twenty-five years later. Today, protesters of the bill undoubtedly sense that they are again on the front lines of the battle for the fate of the labor movement. But it seems that for many of them it is just as much about democracy and exercising their rights more generally: there are constant references to the recent democratic uprising in Egypt and elsewhere in the Middle East. A recent army veteran said at one of the rallies that he had not fought for the democratic rights overseas to have them taken away from him at home. Daily rallies outside of the Capitol begin with the singing of “The Star Spangled Banner.” The crowd inside the building recited the “Pledge of Allegiance” along with the lawmakers at the opening of Wednesday’s legislative session that was broadcast on closed-circuit TV.

The bill is still up for a vote: the governor hasn’t backed away from any of its draconian stipulations, and Republican legislators have vowed not to amend it in any significant way. Supporters of the bill are expected in Madison on Saturday. It is unclear how many will arrive and how many of them will actually be from Wisconsin. According to a recent poll, two thirds of Wisconsinites believe the bill goes too far and strongly oppose it (including the provision to remove collective bargaining rights). Even though the legislative committee stopped taking testimony early Wednesday morning, people keep signing up to speak before an on-going listening session by the state assembly’s Democrats.

At the very least, the governor’s stance has clearly galvanized the labor and progressive movements. A running joke among local labor activists has been: “Who hired Scott Walker as a lead organizer?” Although they also wish this wasn’t gallows humor.

