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February 20, 2011: What is Behind the Republican Assault on Public Sector Unions?

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Title: What is Behind the Republican Assault on Public Sector Unions?

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2/20/2011—Because of the recession, many States are experiencing fiscal distress. Since employee wages and benefits are a major portion of the budget of every State, it is inevitable that there will be tension between unions and Governors over where cuts can be made.

But what is happening in Wisconsin, and now in other States, is different. Led by Governor Scott Walker's plan to restrict the bargaining rights of State workers, Republican Governors in several States are trying to limit or eliminate collective bargaining rights of government workers. ([story here](#)).

Two forces are at work here. One is that many Republicans consider government to be "the problem" and government unions prevent or hinder reducing the size of government.

But much more significant is Republican antipathy to unions themselves. In part this is simple partisanship. Overwhelmingly, unions support Democrats with money and political workers.

Beneath that, however, is an ideology of individualism. Republicans tend to strongly support capitalism. Capitalism teaches that every person is, and should be, rewarded on individual merit. Its engine is self-interest. Conversely, unions teach solidarity, that we are members of a collective group and that we stand and fall together. To many Republicans, this sounds like socialism.

In Christianity, the difference between individualism and solidarity has always been recognized as a religious issue. Thus, the Catholic Church has always been a supporter of unions in particular and workers' rights in general.

Where is the Church today on these issues? It is hard to tell. Locally, Catholic and Protestant leaders may be involved in these struggles without the media seeing it as part of the story. So, the effort is largely invisible.

But I suspect that the Church has basically been silent. For one thing, the Catholic Church in America has lost a lot of its focus on social and economic justice and has become fixated on abortion and gay rights. Worse, a lot of Protestants have become enamored of individualism and no longer see the connection between unions and the gospel. (This would certainly dismay Karl Barth).

As for secularists, we certainly fall into the individualist camp, unfortunately. You never see the New Atheists saying anything much about economic issues and I doubt the word "solidarity" is even listed in the indexes of any of their books.

Ironically, individualism turns out to be bad for business. A large part of the problem of maldistribution of wealth in America is the result of the decline in private sector unions. Corporate America has been so successful in suppressing unions that it has taken a much larger share of the profits that business generates. This in turn has reduced the purchasing power of its potential American customers. Workers are consumers. The traditionally high wages of American workers created an internal market that enriched business. Now those corporate profits do not reward workers, but shareholders. Shareholders don't buy as many products as workers. So, the decline of unions has led to the decline of American economic growth. This has hurt American corporations.