

It's not about Wisconsin

Attacks on public employees reflect a larger battle for the middle class

By Yvonne Walker
President, SEIU Local 1000

The battles that are playing out in the state capitols of Wisconsin and Ohio are relevant to all Americans—at least all of us who depend on our jobs to survive.

This national struggle isn't about the unions. Nor is it about jobs. It's about shifting political and economic power from the middle class to the wealthy few. We are fighting over fairness and equality. This battle is about what kind of America we want to have. It's about who is for the middle class and who is not.

No one has to tell California state employees that we're under attack. The truth is, there are very powerful groups that want to push down wages and roll back benefits all across the nation—and they'll win unless we work together and stop them.

Rich get richer

The rich are getting much richer while the rest of us go to work every day and fight for their leftovers. Since 1981, after-tax income has tripled for the wealthiest 1 percent of Americans, while it has barely exceeded inflation for most of the rest of us. Economic recovery has bypassed most Americans.

Consider this:

- Corporations posted an estimated \$1.6 trillion in profits last year, but one in six Americans has no job
- Wall Street bonuses increased 17 percent last year, but for most Americans real buying power has not increased for 20 years
- In the past two decades, 80 percent of the income growth has gone to the wealthiest 1 percent, but every 20 seconds an American files for bankruptcy

I heard a joke recently that sums it up: A CEO, a union member and Tea Party member are sitting at a table with a dozen cookies. The CEO immediately takes 11 cookies for himself and then turns to the Tea



Party member and says, 'Watch out for that union guy, he wants part of your cookie!'

A fair economy

When a multi-billion dollar online retailer such as Amazon refuses to collect the same sales tax that any mom-and-pop store has to pay—and then threatens economic retribution, that is not fair.

When crude oil sells for more than \$100 a barrel and oil companies show record profits, but their executives refuse to pay any tax on the oil they extract in California, that's not fair.

When political leaders propose eliminating pension programs for state employees and private corporations have spent decades reducing or eliminating retirement obligations for most of their employees outside the executive suite, that's not fair.

This is what the battle is about: Across our great nation—middle class, working families are stepping up to fight for the future of America. We are fighting against a very organized attack designed to break unions, reduce wages and leave working, middle-class families, with fewer rights, fewer protections and fewer options.

I invite you to join us in our new campaign—*Fight For a Fair Economy*. We need an economy that works for all of us—not just the wealthy few. For more information, go to seiu1000.org

Acting locally & thinking nationally

Stockton EDD activist Nikki Linnerman sees national battle for working families

A decade ago Nikki Linnerman became active in Local 1000 because she was concerned about her coworkers being

mistreated at a state office in Stockton—she won that fight years ago. Now she is fighting for all workers in America.

“What you see going on in Wisconsin with state workers on the verge of losing their bargaining rights is really happening in some form all over this country,” said Linnerman, a disability insurance examiner in the Employment Development Department (EDD). “The middle class is under attack. The powerful forces that are trying to cut wages and reduce benefits will win if we don’t stand up to them.”

Like many EDD employees, her job has given her a front-row seat as California’s families are battered by the economic crisis. But it is her union activism that has really broadened her perspective to see the sheer depth of the problems faced by working families.

Always seeking challenges

“Nikki is the kind of activist who really improves Local 1000 and everyone around her,” Local 1000 president Yvonne Walker said. “She is always looking for new challenges and ways that we can improve what we do.”

After 10 years as a steward, Linnerman was recently elected secretary to Local 1000’s District Labor Council 769. She has been working to elect labor-backed candidates for years, and serves on the executive

boards of labor councils in San Joaquin and Stanislaus, as well as the North Valley Labor Federation. But recently, the Stockton native has gained a better understanding of the national struggles of middle class families by serving on the executive board of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW).

At a national CLUW conference in February, she heard stories from workers all over the country—stories about employees whose wages were unilaterally cut by their bosses, stories about families who saw their benefits reduced, and stories from workers mistreated by bosses because they were not represented by a union.

“All over America there are middle class families that are seeing life get worse for them.”

—Nikki Linnerman
Employment Development Department

California is not an island

“State workers have been through some tough times with furloughs under Schwarzenegger and attacks on our retirement security, but it’s a lot worse elsewhere—I’ve seen how workers in other industries are permanently losing their benefits. In other parts of the country wages are dropping, pensions are being eliminated, and more and more people are falling out of the middle class.”

Possibly what troubled her most was hearing from workers in other states that bosses are bringing in



pricey consultants who specialize in attacking unions and encouraging employees to turn on each other.

Linnerman returned to California from the Atlanta CLUW conference determined to invigorate the labor movement and get more state workers active in Local 1000 before things get any worse.

“California is not an island—there is a national fight going on and our situation is not as secure as it may seem,” Linnerman said. “If unions lose in all these other states and working people keep losing ground in the private sector, the pressure on California state workers will become unbearable. Pensions are just one example. If we don’t fight for better retirement benefits for other workers, we will lose ours.”

The proposed special election over extending current taxes to avoid further cuts to schools and public safety programs is an opportunity to draw in new activists. Her hope is to double the number of active Local 1000 members and bring more young state workers to meetings.

“I challenge everyone in Local 1000 to bring a coworker to a union meeting, reach out to a young person in your office and get them involved too,” she said.



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