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Theorizing Wisconsin's 2011 protests:

Community-based unionism confronts accumulation by dispossession

ABSTRACT

Recent waves of social-movement protest in Wisconsin challenge conventional understandings of labor activism, as they have responded not only to rollbacks of labor rights but also to privatization of state programs and resources and budget cuts that target poor and working families. Drawing from participant-observation, I explore the question of whether the movements that arose in Wisconsin in early 2011 represented an expansion of union-based activism struggling within the “expanded reproduction” of capital or a broader struggle against what New Enclosures Movement scholars have conceptualized as capital’s ongoing primitive accumulation strategies. I examine the implications of the answer to this question for community-based labor movements in Wisconsin and beyond.

[community-based unionism, labor, accumulation by dispossession, social movements, social protest]

S ometime on Monday, February 14, I stepped into a parallel universe. I entered a world where firefighters and students slept side by side in SpongeBob SquarePants sleeping bags on the cold marble floor of the Wisconsin State Capitol, where donations from Cairo paid for pizza to feed students running phone banks, and where people wearing Green Bay Packers caps greeted each other on the street with the Steelworkers’ slogan “One day longer.” It was a universe where more than 100,000 people—busloads of nurses and teachers from Milwaukee, sanitation workers, brigades of corrections officers, firefighters decked out in their gear, and police officers carrying “Cops for Labor” signs—stood ankle deep in snow in 15-degree weather singing union ditties and Bob Marley songs. In that universe, people repeated over and over again that we were finally drawing a line in the sand against the politics of austerity and the war on unions—until U.S. Representative Tammy Baldwin took a look at her cold, bundled-up constituents and pointed out that we might more appropriately say that we were drawing a line in the snow.

The tens of thousands of protesters who marched, chanted, and sang outside the State Capitol in the early spring of 2011 evoked memories of other protests—antiwar movements, labor rallies, global justice campaigns—but I could not escape the feeling that I was in the presence of something unusual. In part, I was struck by the sheer number of people who were expressing support for unions. “I didn’t know this many people knew what a union was,” a colleague from the University of Wisconsin (UW) School for Workers quipped. As a newly elected Republican governor and legislature unveiled draconian bills targeting public-sector employees’ collective bargaining rights coupled with harsh spending cuts, public outrage spilled into the streets and then channeled into dozens of grassroots efforts organizing recall petitions, boycotts, and an alternative budget.¹ Although the strong union presence seemed to mark this as a labor movement, other aspects of the scene were less consonant with that interpretation. Many union members carried signs that did not address

their rights as workers but the broader issues of spending cuts—for example, members of a national nurses' union held placards proclaiming “Some Cuts Don't Heal.” At the same time, despite the governor's explicit attempt to portray public-sector workers as privileged, lazy, and responsible for the state's purported budget deficit, massive numbers of nonunion community members showed up to support them. Signs reflected this too—from one young man's banner reading “Gays for Unions: The Other Kind This Time” to the ubiquitous “I ♥ My Teacher.” If the 1999 protests against the World Trade Organization in Seattle had produced the unlikely collaboration of workers and environmentalists that came to be known as “Teamsters and Turtles,” what kind of alliance or amalgamated movement was emerging in this snowy square in the upper Midwest?

This question about what was happening in Wisconsin speaks to a larger one—what kinds of social movements do the political rationality and policy regime of neoliberalism give rise to? As Angeliqve Haugerud observes, “Neoliberalism has sparked a stunning array of popular counter-movements” (2010:112) that often target corporate power. Scholars generally agree that popular responses to economic liberalization “render obsolete the overarching oppositions of working-class/poor and global North/global South that have long framed our narratives of class and social inequality” (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008:5). They suggest that these movements have shifted the terrain of political organization away from traditional political parties and unions and into a “less focused political dynamic of social action across the whole spectrum of civil society” (Harvey 2003:168). Sociologists call these more diffuse manifestations of discontent “new social movements” and see them as reflecting the problems and possibilities of globalization.² Both in its fluid organization and the array of concerns it addresses, this “movement of movements” is seen as a significant departure from social mobilizations of the past.

Since the late 1990s, there has been a growing tendency to understand these kinds of oppositional politics as responding to various forms of “dispossession” unleashed as part of the latest wave of neoliberal globalization. Activists themselves were the first to argue that the global circulation of capital under neoliberalism has entailed robbing poor communities of many kinds of material and cultural resources. Members of movements as diverse as the Zapatista uprising in Chiapas, the opposition of the Ogoni people of the Niger Delta to Shell Oil, battles against World Bank-funded dams, and the “water wars” in which activists resisted the privatization of water in Bolivia have understood themselves as responding to dispossession. Speaking from these movements, Subcomandante Marcos (2001), Vandana Shiva (1992), Arundhati Roy (1999), and others have produced impassioned statements tying “privatization of the commons” and loss of collective resources

to global movements toward deregulation and market fundamentalism.

Beginning in the 1990s, a group of scholars sometimes labeled the “New Enclosures School” began to revisit Marx's concept of “primitive accumulation” to theorize these forms of dispossession (see Caffentzis 1995; De Angelis 2001; Federici 2001; Perelman 2000). Most Marxist scholars have understood primitive accumulation as part of the prehistory of capitalism and as having two intertwined dimensions: Early capitalists forcibly confiscated land and other resources to bankroll their nascent enterprises, and, in so doing, they separated agriculturalists and craft workers from the resources they needed for self-provisioning, leaving them no recourse but to sell their labor on the market to survive. In contrast, Italian economist Massimo De Angelis has argued that Marx did not mean for this process to be understood as simply historical but as an ongoing feature of even mature capitalist systems. According to De Angelis, capitalists resort to primitive accumulation whenever workers find ways to overcome their separation from the means of production or to set limits on their exploitation—whenever they create what Karl Polanyi (2001) called the “protective covering” of social institutions.³ These protections can include labor laws, unions, the social programs of the welfare state, and forms of collective property as well as subsistence resources that make workers less dependent on their wages. In this view, primitive accumulation is not just about the amassing of capital for productive investment—it is the attempt of capitalists to reinstate the radical separation of workers from the means of production, to remove their protective covering. Although, in theory, capital accumulation does not “need” primitive accumulation, in practice, it is required whenever the working classes create “obstacles” to the accumulation process.

This understanding of primitive accumulation as a continuous, and thus contemporary, phenomenon was given a wider stage with David Harvey's now-famous chapter on “Accumulation by Dispossession” in his 2003 book *The New Imperialism*.⁴ In this chapter, Harvey echoes the New Enclosure School in arguing that primitive accumulation was not simply capital's “original sin” but remains “powerfully present within capital's historical geography”; he says, in fact, that it has been “the primary contradiction to be confronted” (2003:145, 177) in the period since 1973. In contrast to De Angelis, Harvey suggests that capitalists pursue strategies of primitive accumulation, which he calls “accumulation by dispossession,” when they face an overaccumulation crisis—that is, when the supply of capital exceeds opportunities for productive investment. Building on Rosa Luxemburg's work on imperialism, he argues that, under these circumstances, capitalists return to dispossession as a way to gain new assets for profitable use. Like De Angelis, he understands primitive accumulation to differ from

normal accumulation in being imposed through extra-economic force, often wielded by the state. Both De Angelis and Harvey agree that the relatively high wages and generous benefits won by workers in industrialized nations in the post-World War II period contributed to the overaccumulation crisis that began in 1973 and that this crisis touched off the waves of dispossession that many now associate with neoliberal globalization. But for De Angelis, the most important goal and consequence of dispossession is the stripping away of the protection, supports, and labor-market exit options that workers had gained in the post-World War II period. For Harvey, the main point is the freeing of “new” assets for productive investment.⁵

Harvey’s narrower concept of dispossession leads him to spend a great deal of time, in his chapter, distinguishing between social movements that struggle within the sphere of the “expanded reproduction of capital”—that is, the struggles of workers for improvements in living standards—and struggles against accumulation by dispossession. Harvey argues that these two kinds of movements are organically linked, because capitalists put the resources they confiscate to new uses, expanding employment in the process. But, in his view, these struggles respond to different moments in the accumulation process, arise out of different sets of social relationships, and challenge different forms of power. In addition, although this is not absolute, they tend to be differentially distributed between global North and South, with movements in the sphere of expanded reproduction located mainly in industrialized nations and those against dispossession of greater importance in the global South.

Sharryn Kasmir and August Carbonella have both enthusiastically acclaimed and critically engaged Harvey’s framework. They see his account as providing a valuable foundation for understanding dispossession’s role in neoliberal globalization. But, they argue, by portraying labor movements and struggles against dispossession as obeying distinct logics and pursuing different goals, Harvey “recreates the very dichotomies that his theory might otherwise undo” (Kasmir and Carbonella 2008:7), leading him to miss the web of connections that can unite subaltern movements or to dismiss them as “tangible solidarities” (2008:17) that are not really relevant to the logic of the capital accumulation process. They suggest, in contrast, that workers’ contemporary struggles to maintain jobs, wages, and benefits in the face of capital flight and downsizing should be seen as responses to dispossession and thus as integrally linked to the resistance of peasants and the urban poor. Like De Angelis and the New Enclosures School, Kasmir and Carbonella (2008:12) see capital’s accumulation crises as linked to the growth of working-class power and understand dispossession as a crucial tool for capitalists seeking to regain control.

All of this has taken me far from the scene outside the Wisconsin State Capitol and the noisy protesters with cowbells and signs. But it allows me to more clearly pose the question of what they—we were doing there, and more to the point, what we were doing there together. Were there two intertwined and solidary struggles—one to protect union rights and the other to shore up livelihoods by protecting collective resources that were being stripped away by the governor’s politics of austerity? Or were we all in it together—had the claim that “an injury to one is an injury to all” spilled over the boundaries of union membership to encompass the working classes, defined in the broadest way possible? The events that unfolded in Wisconsin in the early months of 2011 provide an opportunity to explore the theoretical purchase and political implications of these two related, but distinct, understandings of dispossession and its relationship to social movements responding to neoliberalism.

Wisconsin as political field

The state of Wisconsin is not, as is often imagined, full of towns like Garrison Keillor’s Lake Wobegon, where everyone is docile, Lutheran, and above average. Nor does widespread interest in cheese, bratwurst, football, and beer always overshadow politics. The state was home to two very different political heroes: the legendary Progressive Party leader Fightin’ Bob LaFollette and the notorious chair of the 1950s House Un-American Activities Committee, Senator Joe McCarthy. Despite its (self-promoted) image as “America’s Dairyland,” less than 2 percent of the state’s gross domestic product derives from agriculture and forestry. Even though it lost 160,000 manufacturing jobs between 1998 and 2008, in 2009 Wisconsin had a larger share of its employment in that sector than any other state except Indiana (Center on Wisconsin Strategy [COWS] 2010:6; Wisconsin Council on Children and Families [WCCF] 2011b). Wisconsin was the site of the Bayview Massacre, where, in 1886—the same week as the Haymarket Riots in Chicago—seven workers were killed fighting for the eight-hour day.

Like many other parts of the world, Wisconsin has been through decades of deindustrialization. Its manufacturing employment peaked in the 1970s when cities like Milwaukee, Racine, Kenosha, Janesville, and Beloit made everything from cars to blenders, farm machinery to paste wax. Companies like Allis Chalmers and Allen Bradley were known around the world. They provided decent jobs, not out of the goodness of their hearts but because they had strong unions. In a familiar story, they began shuttering factories, merging with transnational firms, and moving jobs offshore in the 1970s. Inner-city Milwaukee lost 80 percent of its manufacturing jobs between 1970 and 2000. This deindustrialization was especially devastating to black workers, who had found work in factories but were last hired and

first fired. In 1970, the black poverty rate in Milwaukee was 22 percent lower than the national average; by 2000, it was 34 percent higher (Collins and Mayer 2010:36). Despite the loss of these manufacturing jobs, overall unemployment in the state generally runs slightly below the national average (it reached 8.9 percent at the height of the 2008–09 recession but registered 7.8 percent in 2010);⁶ nevertheless median family income in the state declined more than the national average between 2000 and 2010—\$2,896 compared to \$2,021 (COWS 2010:1).

As corporations in Wisconsin and elsewhere constructed new global circuits of capital accumulation by moving their jobs overseas in the 1970s, they began to chafe, more than ever before, at paying taxes. Cutting government programs—or, in their terms, “starving the beast”—was partly ideological, but it was also about reducing their tax burden. When corporations hired workers from their own communities, it mattered to them that those workers were healthy and educated. As they began to subcontract production elsewhere, they became unwilling to support these public-sector services, especially because many executives sent their children to private schools, relaxed at country clubs instead of public parks, and did not rely on public transportation. By the mid-2000s, two-thirds of Wisconsin corporations paid no taxes at all (COWS 2007). A globally dispersed—rather than a regionally integrated—labor process broke critical links between production and consumption, actions and accountability.

This is not just an isolated empirical point but speaks to shifts in what regulation theorists call the “regime of accumulation.”⁷ Following Antonio Gramsci, these theorists use the idea of such a regime to talk about the relationship between production and consumption in an economy at a given historical moment. A regime of accumulation includes norms about how work is organized; financial rules; management practices; accepted principles about how income should be divided among wages, profits, and taxes; consumption norms; and related patterns of demand. The regime of accumulation that fascinated Gramsci was Fordism. Everyone knows that Henry Ford introduced the \$5-, eight-hour day in 1914. He understood that for his company to sell cars, workers were going to have to have enough income to buy them and enough leisure to use them. He kept this approach, even through the worst of the Depression. During the massive labor mobilizations of the 1930s, this vision of how the fruits of labor should be distributed was a powerful part of workers’ ideas about how the world should be organized and what was fair.

By the 1940s, as the United States began to recover from the Depression, new expectations about work began to grow up around practices of assembly-line production pioneered in the auto industry. Ford and General Motors were the template firms of that era. Not only did they pay their workers enough to buy cars and the other household

necessities of the day but they also recognized unions and engaged in collective bargaining with their workers. The so-called Treaty of Detroit in 1948 guaranteed that workers’ income would increase annually regardless of inflation, recession, or corporate profitability. And increase it did: The real income of auto workers doubled between 1947 and 1973, and the real income of those in the bottom half of the U.S. income distribution rose as rapidly as that of those in the top 10 percent during that period (Harvey 1989:ch. 8; Lichtenstein 2002:130–140).

This wage growth represented a new societal consensus about how income should be shared among workers and owners of capital. It was part of a mode of growth in the larger economy that was based on the following interlinked features: mass production, rising productivity based on economies of scale, rising incomes linked to productivity, increasing demand due to rising wages, increased profits based on full utilization of capacity, and increased investment in improved mass production. Not all workers and branches of industry participated directly in mass production—racial and gender segregation relegated many to a secondary sector that was far less stable and well paid. But the wage bargains struck in companies like Ford and General Motors spread through comparability claims that raised the overall income “floor.” The newly emerging Keynesian state managed conflict between owners and workers and provided social benefits and collective goods and services. Beginning in the 1970s, these arrangements became unstable. Inflation, excess capacity, and global competition drove U.S. corporations to find ways to roll back their bargains with workers. Through the next four decades, the rise of neoliberal economic globalization and the erosion of the “Fordist bargain” went hand in hand.

With the decline of manufacturing, services became the new lifeblood of the Wisconsin economy. The term *service sector* covers a broad range of jobs, from the performance of sophisticated computer operations to mopping floors, and the labor-intensive subsector has grown far more rapidly than its knowledge-intensive counterpart (Katz 2002:351). The sources of service-sector growth were various. As working-class men lost manufacturing jobs and good wages, women increased their work hours outside the home. This created demand for restaurant meals and take-out dinners, cleaning services, and care for children and the elderly. At the same time, the health care system expanded dramatically. As Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992) has shown, the racial attitudes that structured the experience of poor women of color in domestic labor in many parts of the country followed them into the labor market when domestic tasks were commodified, and these attitudes continue to pervade the low-wage service sector. Thus, despite the place-bound nature of service employment, which ought to give workers more bargaining power, wages remain low and working conditions poor (Collins and Mayer 2010:ch. 2).

The struggles in Wisconsin in 2011 were triggered by the governor's assault on working conditions and rights in public-sector employment. Wisconsin does not have a disproportionately large share of public-sector workers—in fact, it ranks 43rd in the nation in the proportion of state and local government employees to residents (WCCF 2011c). But its public workers are more heavily unionized. AFSCME (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees)—one of the nation's largest public-sector unions—was founded in Wisconsin in 1932. In 2010, 50 percent of Wisconsin's public-sector workers were represented by unions, compared to 40 percent nationally (WSAU-Wausau 2011).⁸ As William Jones (2011), a professor of history at UW–Madison emphasized in a speech he gave at an April 4 rally at the Capitol, securing public-sector jobs has been an especially important upward-mobility strategy for African American men and women, who, like white women, make up a disproportionate share of workers in these jobs and in their unions. Given the rollbacks in manufacturing employment of the past four decades, and the continuing degraded conditions of much service-sector work, by 2010 public-sector jobs were unusual in offering stable employment, health insurance, defined-benefit pensions, sick days, and vacation days. They were, in the minds of many, the last good jobs in the Wisconsin economy.

The significance of these public-sector jobs was magnified by the fact that so many households in the state had at least one public-sector worker in them, and so many got their health and retirement benefits through that individual. One in seven Wisconsin farm families received state-subsidized health insurance—in most of the rest, someone worked as a nurse or teacher to access those benefits (*Capital Times* 2011c). Small business owners and Wal-Mart workers were in the same boat, holding onto benefits that were increasingly scarce in the economy at large by virtue of their connection to a public-sector worker. Joe the Plumber, it turns out, was often living with Betty the Teacher.

Politically, Wisconsin has sometimes been called a “purple state.” Although the metaphor of a color between red and blue suggests a middle-of-the-road blending of perspectives, the reality is that the state is politically polarized, with roughly equal numbers of diehard Republican and Democratic voters and a large number of independents who swing between the two political parties (*Wisconsin State Journal* 2009). In 2008, Democrats garnered a historically large victory, as Barack Obama won more counties in Wisconsin than in any other state in the nation. But in November 2010, the state elected a Republican governor and Republican majorities in both houses of its legislature. Whereas polling suggested that this was in large part a response to economic conditions (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 2010b), it was also undoubtedly influenced by the huge sums of corporate money funneled into state elections in

the aftermath of the Supreme Court's 2010 Citizens United decision.⁹

An overview of the protests

Wisconsin's newly elected governor, Scott Walker, had campaigned on a moderate set of proposals, although his record as administrator of Milwaukee County showed him to be a fan of privatization of government services. When he took office in January 2011, the state had no deficit in its current budget, and the long-term deficit, while significant, was smaller than that faced by former governor Jim Doyle when his term began. During his first days in office, Walker remedied this sound fiscal situation by giving away \$137 million in tax breaks to corporations, leaving the state with a shortfall that cried out for a solution (Klein 2011). That same week, he made the state's Department of Commerce a public–private hybrid that was funded by—but not accountable to—taxpayers and passed an executive order limiting lawsuits against corporations.

On February 11, just two weeks later, the governor proved his determination to achieve a national profile as a radical Republican reformer when he unveiled his so-called Budget Repair Bill, along with a somewhat off-key threat to call out the National Guard should there be resistance to it. Despite its name, the bill contained a laundry list of nonfiscal items, the most notorious of which was the evisceration of collective bargaining rights for public employees, home health workers, and day care workers.¹⁰ It targeted public-sector unions in other ways as well, imposing elaborate new rules for certification and limiting arbitration rights. And in a seemingly random set of neoliberal gestures, it also offered state subsidies for commercial development of protected wetlands, put 37 state-run power plants up for sale on a no-bid basis, and gave state administrators leeway to rewrite Medicaid rules and slash its funding without public hearings or legislative input (State of Wisconsin 2011).

The weekend after the bill was unveiled, as word spread about its provisions, protesters gathered around the State Capitol and the governor's mansion. On Monday, the UW–Madison Teaching Assistants Association (TAA) marched to the Capitol square. On Tuesday, more than half of Madison area teachers simultaneously got the flu, and over 13,000 people showed up at the Capitol as the Joint Finance Committee began hearings on the bill. In an effort to slow its passage, hundreds signed up to testify about the bill's impacts. As it became clear that hearings would continue through the night, the TAA began to organize the care and feeding of those who would stay. Local businesses delivered free food, people brought in bedding, and the TAA set up an operations center on the third floor of the building.

On Wednesday, the teacher sick-out spread beyond Madison, and 20,000 protesters showed up in the snow. Teachers, nurses, and prison guards lined up to give

speeches about the impacts of losing collective bargaining rights. Teachers noted that they would no longer have any influence over class size. Nurses pointed out that they would lose a voice in work rules with implications for patient care. One quipped, "Do you really want me inserting your Foley catheter after I've worked back-to-back ten-hour shifts?" Meanwhile, in the Capitol rotunda, students kept up a drum circle and led thousands in chants and songs. It became clear that the governor's attempt to isolate public-sector workers was not going so well, as private-sector unions turned out massively in solidarity. Firefighters and the police, who had been exempted from the loss of collective bargaining rights, distributed food, gave rousing speeches, and marched, often with traditional bagpipes.

By the morning of February 17, as the governor and Republican majority in the legislature single-mindedly and hastily pursued their agenda, nerves were frayed on all sides. In the legislature, as Republican senators shut down amendments and proceeded toward a vote, the 14 Democratic senators suddenly walked out of chambers, climbed into a small bus, and headed for the Illinois border. The crowds in the Capitol roared with joy as they realized what was happening. The governor had introduced the Budget Repair Bill as a fiscal measure, despite its nonbudgetary, union-busting elements. Because fiscal bills required a superquorum, the Democratic senators were making it impossible for the senate to vote on the bill, buying time for a broader public discussion. As schools around the state closed, 25,000 people rallied at the Capitol.

By Friday, the crowd had grown to 40,000, national labor leaders and the Reverend Jesse Jackson had shown up, and national media had begun to cover the story. A judge denied the Madison School District's request to force teachers to return to the classroom. Demonstrators occupying the Capitol began to form a utopian village with its own rules and culture. Members of the TAA cleaned inside and out every night, organized recycling, coordinated free food deliveries, and ran a phone bank. They set up an information desk, and their yellow-vested marshals circulated to answer questions and keep order. They organized a team of medics and distributed hand sanitizer to prevent colds. Progressive-era reformer Bob LaFollette's statue on the second floor became a shrine where people placed fresh flowers every day. Nearly every square inch of the Capitol walls was covered with signs (attached using blue painter tape to avoid damaging the marble). There was a "cuddle puddle" for naps, a family area with toys for children, and a quiet space for meditation. The chant "Whose House?—Our House" lost its sports overtones and became a mantra of civic pride.

On Saturday, February 19, the Capitol square was jammed with over 70,000 people chanting "Kill the bill" and singing union songs. The next day, as tens of thousands returned to march in bitter cold with sleet falling, the gov-

ernor announced plans to clear the Capitol. Around 11:00 that night, a contingent of steelworkers marched in to sleep alongside the occupiers. The following night, firefighters showed up, and the night after that, the police. When State Senator Glenn Grothman called the people sleeping there "slobs" and "thugs" (*Wisconsin State Journal* 2011b), little old ladies and babies began to sport signs proclaiming "Another Slob for Workers' Rights" and "Hugs for Union Thugs."

On Wednesday, February 23, an event almost as transformative as the walkout of the Democratic senators occurred. An itinerant blogger from western New York called the governor, posing as one of his billionaire donors, David Koch. Unlike the Democratic senators, union leaders, and constituents who had been calling the governor all week, he got through. It was less what Walker said that was shocking (although he confessed to considering planting troublemakers in the crowds of protesters and asked for donations to the Republican senators) than the tone of his conversation, which made it clear that he was in the pocket of big money and that his agenda and ambitions were determined by interests outside the state. Demonstrators began to target David and Charles Koch's Madison headquarters, and even conservative supporters of the governor began to squirm with discomfort (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 2011b).

Gearing up for the presentation of his full budget proposal on March 1, Walker gave the order for police to clear the Capitol of protesters. The Capitol Police and Madison Police refused. When the Dane County Sheriff announced on the local news that his officers "would not be palace guards," the governor called in the State Highway Patrol, conveniently headed by the father of two powerful Republican lawmakers (*Wisconsin State Journal* 2011a). After a standoff of 36 hours, protesters agreed to leave, convinced that the governor would like nothing better than an altercation. Once the protesters were removed, access to the State Capitol, for the first time in its history, required passing a metal detector. But something of the spirit of the occupation remained in the sign posted at the screening point, which said, "No animals/snakes, balloons, coolers, crockpots, easels, massage chairs, buckets, drumsticks, trash can lids, vuvuzelas . . ." Despite a judge's injunction requiring a return to preprotest levels of security, access remained limited until after passage of the governor's budget in mid-June of 2011 (Reuters 2011).

When the governor presented his full budget on March 1, the focus of the protests began to shift from the defense of labor rights to a broader resistance to "the politics of austerity"—that is, to the use of claims of budgetary distress to demand concessions from the poor and working classes. These techniques, so widely promoted by the IMF and World Bank throughout the global South since the 1980s, and familiar in the United States since the Reagan era, were deployed with a new vengeance. Riding the

bus that day, I clustered with others around the one person who had a copy of the budget. We pored over its 602 pages, each packed with startling provisions. The budget cut public school funding by \$900 million, whereas charter schools received new dollars. It canceled state-subsidized health insurance for 70,000 people and cut the \$600-a-month cash welfare payment. It reduced the state Earned Income Tax Credit and Homestead Tax Credit for the working poor. It turned over the state's Income Maintenance Program, which helps poor people access food stamps and medical assistance, to a private company that requires online applications and has a 400-day service backlog. It proposed making the UW–Madison a “public authority” separate from the rest of the state college system. It defunded Planned Parenthood and allowed health insurers to exclude birth control from coverage. It lifted limits on phosphorus in the water supply—a move especially beneficial to Koch Industries in the state—and it disbanded and defunded public transit authorities and recycling programs. And in a gesture that flew in the face of Republican rhetoric about local control, it barred counties and municipalities from raising their own property taxes to take up the slack (State of Wisconsin Department of Administration 2011; see also WCCF 2011a). Protesters' growing awareness that each cut was offset by giveaways to corporations and thus would not really balance the budget fueled their anger. “Wisconsin is not broke!” became a refrain.

Over the next nine days, protests, teach-ins, and marches continued, not just in Madison but in communities across the state: in Eau Claire, Oconomowoc, Ashwabeno, Waukesha, Menomonie, Chippewa Falls, Rice Lake, Fond du Lac, Rhinelander, Beloit, and Milwaukee. Frustrated by their inability to pass legislation without the Democratic senators, senate Republicans gave up the pretense that collective bargaining, Medicaid governance, and power plants were fiscal issues; on March 9, splitting these items from the rest of the bill, they passed them with no public notice. Realizing they had lost as a result of a violation of the state's open meetings law, protesters were visibly angry for the first time. Frustrated by the long lines and screening, one group breached the State Street door of the Capitol, and thousands poured in. They spent that night and the next back in their “house.”

Having lost the immediate battle, unions met to consider what to do next. The South Central Federation of Labor (SCFL) had voted to support a general strike in February (*Wisconsin State Journal* 2011c), but the goals for such an action were not clear. Since the last instance of a statewide general strike was in 1888, no one in the country had experience mounting one (although the federation brought in union members from Ontario to relate their experience with such a strike in 1997). In addition, some union members were hesitant to strike because the Budget Repair Bill contained a provision for firing any public-sector workers

who did not show up for work for three consecutive days. In the end, the unions decided to put their resources into recall drives for eight Republican senators and into the (ultimately unsuccessful) campaign for the April election of a labor-friendly state Supreme Court justice.¹¹ Without further reason to remain holed up in the Best Westerns and Econo-Lodges of northern Illinois, the Democratic senators returned home to a celebration of over 150,000 people (including 50 farmers on tractors) on the Capitol square.

Fighting for labor rights

In many ways, the early struggle in Wisconsin looked like a classic labor battle. The 18-wheel Teamster rigs parked on the Capitol square and the Laborers in their flashy orange T-shirts helped convey this impression. Moreover, the governor's Budget Repair Bill, however clumsy his introduction of it, was precisely crafted to eliminate the state's labor unions.¹² It targeted state workers' pocketbooks by requiring them to pay a higher percentage of their pension and health care costs. But it also targeted the collective bargaining rights of three groups: public-sector workers, day care workers, and home health workers.¹³ It singled out these groups because they were not covered by the National Labor Relations Act, and thus their collective bargaining rights were not given federally but by the state. In 1959, then governor Gaylord Nelson had signed legislation allowing Wisconsin's public employees to collectively bargain. Day care workers and home health workers had only gained these rights under Walker's immediate predecessor, Jim Doyle, who had signed a law establishing “authorities” that provided a mechanism for bargaining to occur. Because these rights were given by the state, the state could take them away. The bill did not fully eliminate collective bargaining rights but limited them to bargaining over wages and held any raises negotiated to the rate of inflation. Negotiations over benefits, work rules, health and safety issues, work hours, shifts and overtime, grievance procedures, seniority provisions, and all other aspects of the employment relationship were prohibited.

The collective bargaining restriction was not the aspect of the bill that tolled the death knell for unions, however. The bill also required all unions to run yearly recertification campaigns in which they would have to gain the votes of 51 percent of the membership; it eliminated the right to arbitration; and it prohibited unions from collecting dues through payroll deduction. Union leaders widely acknowledged that they could never survive under these restrictions and would have to reinvent themselves in some other associational form once the bill took effect. Ultimately, all of the state's public sector unions except the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC) decided against pursuing certification under the new rules.

This also seemed like a labor struggle because of the vicious media attack that the governor and Republican legislators unleashed on public-sector workers. Engaging in an emerging right-wing rhetoric that painted public workers as the new “welfare queens” who “produce nothing” (Cohn 2010), Walker and others attacked them—us as overpaid dead weight dependent on the tax dollars of private-sector employees. This claim had been brewing in right-wing think tanks for years. Two institutes produced the reports on which these claims were based: the Manhattan Institute and the McIver Institute. They were funded by Wisconsin's Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation (founded by mid-20th-century Milwaukee industrialists who were avid members of the John Birch Society), by the (Tea Party-supporting) Koch Family Foundation, and by the Walton Family Foundation (of Wal-Mart fame). These two institutes produced a spate of studies claiming to show that public-sector workers were overpaid in relation to their private-sector counterparts, had more generous benefits, and were a major drain on the resources of state and local governments (SCFL 2011; Think Progress 2011). Liberal economists countered that these studies did not control for the higher educational levels of public workers and other mitigating factors and that, when these were included, public-sector workers were actually underpaid (Keefe 2010), but that did not deter Republican legislators and the media from publicizing the claims. In fact, in bargaining agreements throughout the 1980s and 1990s, public-sector unions had agreed to take benefits (the costs of which were partially deferred) in lieu of wage increases, but this history of concessions did not enter the mainstream debate.

In speeches and press conferences, the governor openly fostered a “beggar thy neighbor” logic, which asked, “Why should your neighbor have these benefits if you don't?” This theme was echoed in the signs brought by Tea Party members on the two weekends that they organized counterprotests at the Capitol. “WEAC = Greed,” one placard read. “Collective Bargaining = Extortion,” another proclaimed. Other variations on this theme included “Quit Complaining, Farmers Don't Have ANY Retirement Packages” and “Pension? Sick Days? Retire at 55? Can I Get In On The Suffering?” Each of these signs positioned the carrier as a worker–taxpayer who made do without the “advantages” supposedly enjoyed by public-sector workers whose collective bargaining rights were being targeted. Although some members of the general public echoed these complaints, a significant number understood that they would not benefit from others losing stabilized wages, health insurance, sick days, annual leave, and pensions. Refusing to take Walker's bait and to vilify workers who still had these benefits, they recognized that with no good jobs to compete against and no models of what a good job

looked like, the race to the bottom in the state would be complete.

Public-sector employment represents a complicated site of labor struggle, because the employer is the state. But Governor Walker did not target or address workers as their employer—he did not, for example, instruct the public agencies that were the direct employers of public workers to demand contract concessions. Rather, the governor sought to legislate change in the rules of the game—to take away workers' rights that had been conferred by the state and to change the rules by which their unions could legally exist and function. This was not a direct struggle between capital and labor (although the governor's corporate backers certainly approved) as much as it was a contest over rights fought on the more universal ground of citizenship.

Union members understood, and foregrounded, the fact that citizenship and rights were at stake. They decided en masse in the first days of the campaign to agree to pay a larger percentage of pension and health insurance costs. Members carried signs proclaiming “It's Not About the Money,” “It's About Rights,” and “Senators Leave Me My Union, Allow Me My Voice.” They framed Walker's Budget Repair Bill as a way to avoid the “ordinary run of things” at the bargaining table—and portrayed it as evidence that he was a bully and a tyrant, disrespecting traditions of fairness in which even the recent Super Bowl winners, the Green Bay Packers, believed. (The Packers were union members, and some team members had voiced support for the protesters.) They worked actively to frame the public debate and media coverage as about rights, even though they knew that the additional benefit costs would greatly harm some of the lowest-waged public workers.

The fact that the governor was changing the rules of the game made the struggle relevant to all workers. Card-carrying public-sector union members, mainly of AFSCME, SEIU (Service Employees International Union), AFT (American Federation of Teachers), MTI (Madison Teachers Inc.), and WEAC, were only a small proportion of the crowds who turned out for the protests. Members of private-sector unions showed up in even larger numbers, including the Teamsters, Steelworkers, UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers), LIUNA (Laborers' International Union of North America), IBEW (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers), and Pipe Trades. These groups articulated a politics of solidarity that saw the governor's and legislature's actions as eroding the legal ground and the rights on which all unions stood. The rights and rules in question gave workers the ability to negotiate with their employers collectively rather than individually and gave them a voice in shaping their conditions of labor. They represented the protective covering of social institutions, in Polanyi's words, won by previous generations.

Fighting the austerity budget

Across the United States, corporate interests have been pushing back against unions, regulations, and protective legislation since the Reagan–Thatcher era. They have re-configured taxes, regulation, and labor laws in ways that have generated the most extreme wealth disparities in the United States in over 100 years (Hacker 2010). Many would argue that their zeal to deregulate contributed to the massive recession of 2008–09. Perhaps because the recession, combined with the election of Barack Obama, threatened their confidence or perhaps because the Citizens United decision allowed them freer play in crafting electoral strategies, corporate players threw their financial and other resources into statehouse elections in 2010 with an intensity never before witnessed. Not just in Wisconsin but in at least a dozen other states, they rolled out neoliberal agendas of accumulation by dispossession, privatizing what they wanted, dismantling what they did not, and shredding the cloak of protective legislation and social programs that benefited workers and the poor. As one state worker pointed out, Wisconsin was an especially important “case” in this attack, because as a high-tax, high-service state with a respectable economy, it was a counterexample to the view of conservative reformers that low taxes and deregulation were prerequisites for economic growth.

Whereas it was the Budget Repair Bill’s assault on labor that captured media attention in the early days of the Wisconsin protests, the governor’s budget and other bills that followed took a scissors to the social safety net. The budget cut over half a million dollars from Medicaid and substantial amounts from the state’s low-income health insurance program known as Badger Care, and it removed the administration of medical assistance from legislative oversight and control. It set enrollment caps for Family Care—a program that provides home- or community-based health care services for the elderly and people with disabilities. It raised taxes on the state’s poorest citizens by reducing the state-level Earned Income Tax Credit and Homestead Tax Credit. It transferred administration of the income maintenance agency that assists the poor in applying for food stamps and medical assistance to a private agency, despite the federal Department of Health and Human Services’ warning that such privatized programs had not met federal standards in other states where they had been implemented (*Capital Times* 2011b). The budget introduced cuts that made the welfare system more punitive: reducing payments to workfare participants, reinstating time limits that had been removed by the previous administration, and eliminating the transitional jobs program. And it made child care more difficult to obtain for the working poor, substantially cutting subsidies and reducing the state supplement to the federal Head Start program.

These issues brought to the struggle groups that had worked against the earlier dismantling of welfare in the state as well as a broad array of antipoverty groups and advocates for children, the elderly, and the disabled. Given the distribution of poverty in Wisconsin, this increased the racial diversity of the movement. Early on in the protests, an African American AFSCME member from Milwaukee said to a largely white crowd, “When they came for us 15 years ago [referring to welfare reform], were you there for us? Not so much. But we’re here for you now.” Similarly, the Budget Repair Bill’s provisions denying prenatal care to undocumented pregnant women and the budget’s elimination of in-state tuition for undocumented college students and food stamps for low-income legal immigrants brought groups like Voces de la Frontera and the Immigrant Workers’ Union to the Capitol. In a state as segregated as Wisconsin, these convergences of interest invited comment. A young black woman from a community organization in Milwaukee speaking at a teach-in said, “When Walker did this, I’ll bet he didn’t expect to see white firefighters sleeping with people of color on the Capitol floor.”

The budget and related legislation targeted services that went beyond the safety net for the poor, elderly, and disabled; it also dismantled many programs that were part of everyday functioning in working-class and middle-class communities. The budget cut public school allocations deeply—by nearly a million dollars. It gave health insurers in the state a bonus by not requiring them to cover certain expensive conditions such as autism, cochlear implants, or end-stage renal disease, and it allowed them to exclude family planning services. Legislation abolished public transit authorities, which were of special significance to the poor but on which a broad swath of the population relied. It sharply cut recycling programs, cut funds for rural Internet expansion, and made it illegal to test drinking-water quality. (This led one protester to wonder out loud if the wealthy got their water from taps like the rest of us.)

Many of the people who showed up at the Capitol were motivated by their anger at these cuts. In speeches and in the signs they carried, they spoke of their reliance on the services state and local government workers provided and the centrality of these services to their quality of life and daily survival. In speech after speech, people expressed gratitude to the aides who took care of their parents in nursing homes and the special education teachers who helped a disabled child. They thanked garbage collectors, snow plow drivers, tree trimmers, and sanitation plant workers. This discourse did not contradict but reinforced the labor message of the protests because the services being cut were often provided by the public workers being targeted. Valuing those services was simultaneously a show of support for—and an act of solidarity with—those who provided them. The signs that pointed to the importance of these services were poignant, funny, and sometimes off-color: “Care For

Your Teachers Like They Care for Your Child"; "I Dislike Taxes, But I Like Schools, Firefighters, Roads, Parks, Most Police Officers . . ."; "Remember This When You Hit a Pot-hole"; "Scott Walker Who's Gonna Wipe Your Ass When You Have a Stroke?" and the timid but profound "Scott Walker Is Why Wisconsin Can't Have Nice Things." The point of the protesters' response was quite clear: We pay taxes to the state to manage these services so they are there when we need them. As the governor and legislature sought to roll back crucial social programs, they ran up against a hidden moral economy of care that has long been their foundation.

The governor's budget and bills introduced and passed in the spring of 2011 did not simply propose cuts to many of these programs but—in ways that accorded with the concept of accumulation by dispossession—sought to privatize them.¹⁴ One bill created a Charter School Authorizing Board that could authorize privately run, publicly funded schools throughout the state. School districts would have to support these new ventures but were not allowed to seek increased revenues to accommodate them, directly funneling public monies into corporate coffers. Charter schools had formerly been limited to Milwaukee, the program having been justified by Tommy Thompson, the former governor who started it, as a way to improve educational outcomes for poor, inner-city Milwaukee students. Combined with the budget's proposed \$900 million in cuts to public school funding, this was a giant step toward privatizing education in the state. One teacher commented, "I thought my colleagues were paranoid when they said years ago that the Charter School program was a first step to privatization of all our schools, but that's sure what it looks like now." As noted, Walker made the state's Commerce Department a state-funded but privately run "economic development" entity. He also restructured the state's Department of Natural Resources into a hybrid public-private "charter agency," despite evidence from Iowa and other states that such a model did not yield cost savings or meet department goals. The budget eliminated a state employee's life insurance program that was entirely self-financing to "open the field" to private insurers. And it put forward an idea that was ultimately turned down by the legislature: making the UW-Madison a "public authority" separate from the rest of the UW System colleges and subject to less state oversight.

This kind of privatization, like the tax cuts with which Walker had started off his term in office, raised questions for the public about corporate dominance of state politics and growing inequality. The use of epithets like "welfare queen" and "slob" against public-sector workers had dramatized that, from the point of view of the corporate elite, black or white, low-waged or on welfare, the bottom 90 percent of the state's population looked pretty much the same. ("Not one of us," as the governor said in the taped prank phone call.) Protesters began to circulate lists of Walker's corporate donors and to organize boycotts against many

of them. Members of the firefighters' union marched into M&I Bank to withdraw their funds. Activists tagged Kimberly Clark products in Wal-Marts, reminding people that the firm was owned by the Koch brothers. Signs addressing this issue were sometimes wordy: "Create a Bill Forcing Big Business to Pay Their Fair Share and Balancing the Budget," "We Pay Our Fair Share, Why Should We Pay Yours?" and "GOP Strategy: Pit Middle and Working Classes against One Another to Hide the Rich Getting Richer." Others evidenced more humor (or at least irony): "They Only Call It Class War When We Fight Back," "Walker Has a Koch Problem," and "Support Our Flunky Fat Cats." Research documenting connections among politicians, corporate sponsors, and conservative think tanks proliferated and circulated on the Internet, leading Republican lawmakers to demand the e-mail correspondence of UW history professor William Cronon, who had posted research on the American Legislative Exchange Council on his personal webpage (*New York Times* 2011).

Protesters spread the news about these cuts and their projected impacts on livelihood through teach-ins and "public hearings." The most visionary response was the effort to craft an alternative "values budget" that would yield financial solvency in a different way. Sponsored by the WCCF, the Institute for Wisconsin's Future, and COWS, and with the participation of 23 other groups, the Values Budget included monetary concessions from state workers but preserved their rights; it proposed narrowly targeted tax increases for corporations and the very wealthy; and it derived \$900 million from improved revenue collection. It cut state programs by \$600 million rather than \$2.48 billion, as the governor's budget proposed. The project drew significant participation from faith-based groups such as the Inter-Faith Coalition for Worker Justice, whose leader, Rabbi Renee Bauer, frequently reminded crowds that "the budget is a moral document." In candlelight vigils and public fora, social movements promoted the alternative budget as based on "shared sacrifice" and as promoting both a strong economy and "opportunity, security and freedom for all Wisconsinites" (WCCF 2011d).

Community-based unionism

The struggles against the "primitive accumulation" measures of budget cuts and privatization and the "labor battle" against restrictions on collective bargaining took place in a single political field—they shared a temporal, geographic, and social space, and protagonists presented their case using a single rhetorical frame. For the governor and the legislature, this frame could be summarized by the governor's twin slogans: "Wisconsin Is Open for Business" and "Wisconsin Is Broke." Walker presented each new initiative as pursuing the former and made necessary by the latter. Drawing on well-known neoliberal principles, the

governor and the legislature insisted that each of the measures they proposed would promote freer markets, or lower taxes, or both, which would lead to growth and a balanced budget. For protesters, in contrast, the dominant frame was a populist one—drawing on the state’s rich history of participation in the National Farmer-Labor Party and Lafollette’s Progressive Party as well as on more recent anticorporate themes from the global justice movement. It alleged that the governor was elitist and not governing on behalf of the vast majority of Wisconsinites. But observing that protesters shared a common space and a common discourse is an empirical response to what was originally a theoretical question. It could still make sense to unravel the intertwined aspects of the struggle if those aspects are related to distinct imperatives in the capital accumulation process. If this were true, it could help clarify distinct motives behind aspects of the Republican offensive that would have implications for the social movement response.

As I struggled with this question, I asked myself, what does struggle within the expanded reproduction of capital look like? I turned the pages of the labor history books on my shelves. It was not the Uprising of the 20,000, in which, in 1909, crowds from all walks of life in New York City came out to protest the safety violations that led to the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire. It was not the 1934 General Textile Strike, which responded to the imposition of new technology that brought the stretch-out—the requirement that workers run several machines at the same time. It was not the historic Durban, South Africa, strike in 1973, in which students came together with workers to fight apartheid and to demand a living wage. It was not the Argentine strikes of 2001, when large segments of the population rose up to support workers striking to convince the government not to comply with IMF austerity measures. In each of these cases, workers struggled not simply for a larger share of the surplus they produced but to wrest back the “protective covering” of work rules and labor laws, of social supports and rights outside the workplace as well as within it.

Perhaps, I thought, the answer could be found in the labor-management “accord” of the post-World War II era in the United States. But, despite acknowledging the tremendous gains made by workers in this era, Nelson Lichtenstein calls the idea of such an accord “a suspect reinterpretation of the post-war industrial era,” albeit one deployed by “liberals and laborites anxious to condemn wage cuts, denounce union-busting, and define what they seemed to be losing in Reagan’s America” (2002:98, 99). As he points out, even though real wages doubled over the 1940s and 1950s, these were years of historically high strike levels and of corporate-sponsored ideological warfare, not to mention the passage of the union-suppressing Taft-Hartley Act. Lichtenstein argues that the “accord” is better characterized as a “limited and unstable truce” (2002:99). It seems that whenever one scratches the surface of a moment of labor

struggle, even at the height of what is now called “Fordism,” one finds capital engaged in activities that fit Marx’s definition of primitive accumulation—that seek to increase or reinstate the dependence of workers on the wage relation by removing the protections they gain from the state or forge through their unions and by circumscribing their options for pursuing an independent livelihood.

Unions have done as much as any other actors to support the myth that labor struggles occur in a privileged separate sphere. Even after the CIO began to challenge the guild traditions of the craft unions, the U.S. labor movement remained exclusionary. In the 1960s’ battles to desegregate workplaces, those who sought racial and gender justice could not count on most unions as ready allies. Although unions developed invaluable practices, like collective bargaining, that raised wages and gave workers a voice, their origins as limited-membership societies and the legacy of exclusionary ideologies led them to understate their connections to the broader communities in which they lived and worked.

As union membership and density declined in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, voices within the movement began to call for new forms of community-based organizing that would include deep partnerships with other community groups, local leadership development, and aggressive political action (Dean and Reynolds 2010; Fletcher and Gaspasin 2009; Moody 1997). Many of these initiatives were inspired by and relied on the groundwork laid by community-based labor movements in the global South that had been imported into the United States by immigrant workers in unions like SEIU and UNITE/HERE. Beginning in 1997, the AFL-CIO founded a Union Cities project to foster this organizing model. Successful experience in a few cities around the country, such as San Jose’s South Bay Labor Council, began to demonstrate the effectiveness of the approach—not so much for increasing union membership as for ramping up the visibility of labor and enhancing its ability to exercise a voice in public debates. Madison’s SCFL and the Milwaukee County Labor Council, although founded long before these efforts, aligned themselves with them, and Madison and Milwaukee were designated union cities in 2001. With these new models, even the highest tiers of organized labor acknowledged the embeddedness of labor’s concerns in a larger array of political issues and the need for a labor movement that was genuinely community based.

Even though the labor movement has never used these terms, this shift could be interpreted as recognizing that labor’s moments of struggle are always a response to capital’s primitive accumulation strategies. Collective bargaining (when it does not break down), European-style corporatist innovations in training, and Japanese “co-management” strategies may qualify as examples of labor negotiating within the sphere of capital’s expanded reproduction. (They

also represent, in many cases, a protective institutional framework won in previous battles with employers.) But moments of struggle and protest always signal a breakdown of the “ordinary run of things,” which occurs when the “ordinary run” has pushed labor’s exploitation too far or when capitalists perceive the existing arrangements to pose an obstacle to the accumulation process.

For theorists of, and participants in, social movements, this means that what Polanyi called “habitation,” what Harvey calls “the politics of the living space,” and what feminists call “social reproduction” of labor is never separate from labor issues. Social reproduction refers to the labor necessary to keep households and communities functioning and to allow them to send productive members out into the world. It includes the activities that reproduce and support individuals from day to day, from year to year, and across generations. We often gloss social reproduction as unpaid domestic labor and child care, but it can also include tax-financed garbage removal and schools and the commodified work of nursing assistants, day care workers, and police officers. As noted, a large proportion of all public-sector employers contribute to social reproduction in the sense that they support the next generation of laborers; care for the ill, the disabled, and the retired; and equip the current generation of workers with what they need to make it out the door each day. The struggle to secure the conditions of social reproduction has always been intertwined with the struggle for higher wages, as workers develop historically and culturally specific arrangements for converting their pay into the goods and services needed to survive.

In one of the labor movement’s attempts to acknowledge the intertwined nature of production and social reproduction, a key writer in the 1990s inadvertently demonstrated how challenging this concept is to U.S. organized labor’s standard paradigm. Community unionism, Kim Moody wrote, has tried to “reach beyond the workplace” to individuals and groups who share the interests of workers. This is about, he says, “the strongest of society’s oppressed and exploited—organized workers—mobilizing those who are less able to sustain self-mobilization: the poor, the unemployed . . . the neighborhood organizations” (Moody 1997:207, 226). Drawing examples from Brazil and South Africa, Moody observed that women were heavily represented in the unions of the textile, garment, and food-processing sectors, and then he went on to write about union members making alliances with the women of the new neighborhood associations. It did not occur to him that the women who lived in the neighborhoods and the women in the unions might be the same people or that these women’s activism might spill over from where they work to where they live or vice versa. His formulation could not acknowledge that the family responsibilities that workers shoulder may lead them to be as concerned about

urban services, clean water, and day care as they are about the wage.

I am arguing here that this theoretical understanding of the unity of the politics of the workplace and the politics of the living space, or community, informed and shaped the 2011 social movement in Wisconsin. The names of many of the organizations formed to support the movement emphasize this unity of struggle: We Are Wisconsin, United Wisconsin, Defend Wisconsin, Voices of Solidarity, Wisconsin Wave. As these names represent a rhetorical effort to claim majority status, they also make the point that “we” are all in this together. I am not arguing that Wisconsin protesters are wiser than the average in figuring this out—it is something that many social movements throughout the history of capitalism and around the world have understood. In fact, the idea that labor is separate from the rest of society has only found expression at a few moments and in a few models. It is there in guild unionism and the U.S. labor movement’s idealized and flawed vision of its postwar accord with industry. And it is there in Marx’s theoretical formulation of how the capital accumulation process operates—but never in his historical examples (Sayer 1987).

What does this mean for my original question—what kinds of social movements do the political rationality and policy regime of neoliberalism evoke? It suggests that capitalists’ use of primitive accumulation strategies or workers shifting their agendas to fight back against dispossession is not unique to the neoliberal era. There are many discourses, policies, and institutional forms that are specific to neoliberalism, but accumulation by dispossession is not one of them. It is a practice that capitalists have honed over centuries of recurrent crises. And from the Diggers to today, the response has always united disparate elements of the community.

What is unique about our recent experiences of neoliberalism is the single-mindedness and effectiveness of the corporate assault across so many aspects of the workplace and the living space and the inability of the “usual suspects” (traditional labor movements) to mount a response. As they pursued their relatively coherent agenda for dismantling the protective covering of New Deal-era programs, corporate interests have achieved deregulation that has allowed them to amass wealth through risky, speculative, and corrupt practices, and they have reduced their tax burdens, shrinking public coffers in the process. Through recent court decisions, they have gained vast new abilities to influence the political process. As each victory enhances the power of the corporate class and lays the groundwork for the next, their forward roll has come to seem almost inevitable. The recession of 2008 and its aftermath may have crippled some types of speculative excess in financial markets, but the elements of a former social compact destroyed by deregulation, union busting, and the gutting of government programs will not be restored by cyclical shifts. It can

only be achieved by social movements energized by a moral economic vision, demanding restoration of the protective covering of labor rights and social resources.

Protesters in Wisconsin may never use the term *accumulation by dispossession*, but the concept captures and theorizes the initiatives unleashed by the governor and legislature in 2011. The presence of labor federations committed to a community-based labor movement and a dense network of grassroots groups have made possible a response that draws together all those affected by the diverse right-wing projects undertaken in the name of “opening Wisconsin for business.” Studying the Wisconsin protests through the lens of recent writing on primitive accumulation suggests the importance of recognizing that resistance to accumulation by dispossession is an ongoing aspect of labor’s struggles. This recognition implies the need for unity between groups targeting labor rights and those concerned more broadly with securing resources for social reproduction. At the time this article went to press, the governor had successfully enacted almost every element of his agenda, but social movements were working to reclaim their lost rights and resources through electoral strategies of recall, continued street protests, and confrontations of public officials at press conferences and public hearings, through legal challenges, and through community-based efforts to create alternative visions of a just society. Whether their protests in the winter and spring of 2011 represented the turning of the tide of the corporate domination of the economy that we call “neoliberalism” or the last gasp of an alternative vision of the social compact remains to be seen.

Notes

1. Not including unions and labor federations, more than 20 pre-existing community organizations of various types became actively engaged in organizing the protests, many linked through a newly formed network called “We Are Wisconsin.” More than a dozen new organizations sprang up to organize specific activities, from managing the recalls of state senators to publishing a coordinated calendar of events. Facebook pages dedicated to organizing protest events were more ephemeral and harder to track, but 20 to 50 appeared to be active at any one time.

2. See Edelman 2001 for a review of anthropological approaches to “new social movements.”

3. De Angelis quotes Marx: “The rising bourgeoisie needs the power of the state, and uses it to regulate wages, i.e. to force them into the limits suitable for making a profit, to lengthen the working day, and to keep the worker himself at his historical level of dependence. This is an essential aspect of so-called primitive accumulation” (2001).

4. Harvey’s account has been deeply influential, and a multitude of authors across many disciplines have taken up and built on his formulation of accumulation by dispossession. These have included researchers studying privatization of natural resources (Mansfield 2008; Prudham 2008; Spronk and Webber 2007), new waves of land appropriation (Arrighi et al. 2010; Hart 2006), corporate confiscation of genetic resources (Kloppenborg 2010), disman-

ting of welfare programs (Altvater 2004), provisions of trade agreements (McCarthy 2004), immigrant labor policy (Walker 2004), homeowners’ losses in the 2008 mortgage crisis (Aalbers 2008), and microfinance as a way of appropriating and harnessing the indigenous economic practices of the poor (Elyachar 2005). What all of these studies have in common is a focus on capitalist classes wresting away collective goods for private benefit—what Harvey calls the “appropriation and cooptation of pre-existing social and cultural achievements” (2003:146).

5. “The notion of primitive accumulation is based on the notion of capital as class relation rather than capital as stock” (De Angelis 2001:5).

6. COWS 2010:10. Black unemployment in 2010 was 23.5 percent in Wisconsin compared to 14.7 percent nationally.

7. Regulation theorists, such as Michel Aglietta (1979) and Alain Lipietz (1987) study how historically specific systems of capital accumulation are stabilized.

8. Public-sector workers nationally are also far more likely to belong to unions than their private-sector counterparts—their respective rates in 2010 were 36.2 percent and 6.9 percent (U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics 2011).

9. *Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission* (2010) held that corporations have a First Amendment right to financially back political candidates by purchasing media ads and other political broadcasts.

10. Twelve other states introduced or passed similar bills in 2011.

11. Democrats gained two seats from Republican senators in the August 2011 recall elections and successfully defended three Democratic seats against Republican recall attempts. This left Democrats one seat short of a majority in the Senate. Recall efforts against Governor Scott Walker were set to begin on November 15, 2011.

12. The bill was not homegrown legislation but was designed by the conservative American Legislative Exchange Council for roll-out in multiple states where Republicans had gained strength in the 2010 elections (Cronon 2011).

13. The governor had originally excluded police officers and firefighters, who were supporters of his campaign, from these new rules, but after their unions participated enthusiastically in the protests, he amended the bill to cover them as well (*Capital Times* 2011a).

14. Walker had a history of ill-fated privatization schemes during his tenure as administrator of Milwaukee County. He hired the private security firm Wackenhut (notorious for the videos that were widely circulated in 2009 of its employees’ drunken revelry in Afghanistan) to guard the Milwaukee County Courthouse, firing the county workers who had formerly held these jobs. When a court declared his action illegal, the county was forced to pay both Wackenhut guards (who had a contract) and county employees. Undeterred, Walker next advanced a plan to hire Wackenhut to transport county prisoners (*Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* 2010a, 2011a).

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