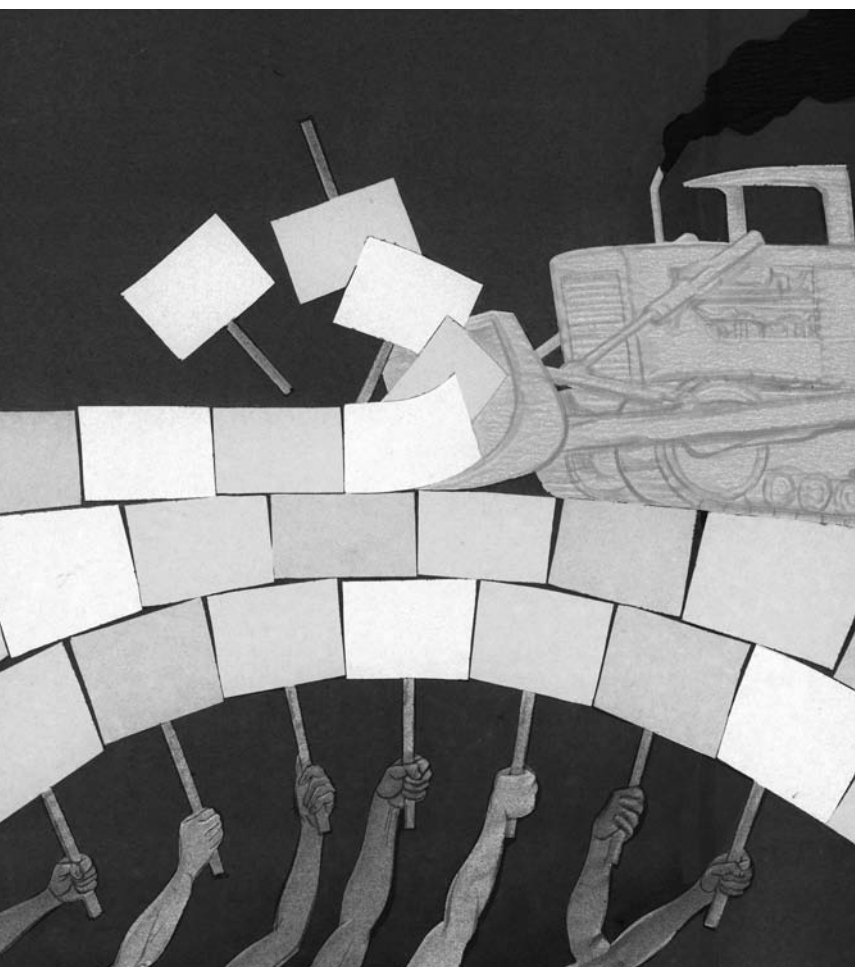


By Rebecca Kemble
Illustration by Alex Nabaum

Walker Rolls Back Civil Rights



ON MARCH 4, JESSE JACKSON was on his second of several visits to Madison in support of the Wisconsin upsurge. Addressing a large crowd, Jackson said, “This is the week we went across the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma for the right to vote. We have gone from Wallace trying to deny us the right to vote to Walker trying to deny workers the right to bargain. We have gone from Wallace to Walker.”

This wasn’t just another clever rhetorical move from a veteran orator. It accurately describes the nature of the legislative onslaught spearheaded by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker. Walker has signed

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into law dozens of measures that systematically dismantle the institutions and practices that have served as the foundation for civil rights in the state. More than any other group, African Americans in Wisconsin are going to feel the brunt.

The hard-won gains of civil rights struggles in the 1950s and 1960s—voting rights, fair housing, equal access to quality public education, decent jobs, and anti-discrimination laws—are all under attack by the Walker administration and his allies in the Republican-controlled state senate and assembly. From a constitutionally questionable voter ID law to the wholesale gutting of public education and the repeal of anti-racial profiling legislation, Republicans are leaving no stone unturned in their zeal to roll back all manner of progressive policy and democratic practice.

“Jim Crow, move over, the Wisconsin Republicans have taken your place,” said state Democratic senator Bob Jauch during debate on the voter ID law that requires voters to present a specific form of photo identification with a current address. The law also extends the residency period from ten to twenty-eight days before one can vote in a particular ward.

In some areas, the nearest DMV office where the officially sanctioned ID can be obtained is several hours away and open for only a few days per month. For people who do not have their own transportation, temporarily live in nursing homes, or cannot afford to miss a day of work, this represents an expense and a hardship they may not be able to manage.

A 2004 Rutgers University study found that voter ID legislation had a marked effect on turnout in communities of color. Comparing states that did and did not require voter ID at the polls, this study showed that turnout was 10 percent less for Hispanic voters, and 6 percent less for African American voters in those states that required ID.

Milwaukee lawmakers are quick to

point out that this disproportionately disenfranchises their constituents.

“This bill has a chilling effect on the vote of the majority,” state senator Spencer Coggs said during a truncated and chaotic debate on the bill. “But when the majority gets a chill, the African American community in the state of Wisconsin gets pneumonia.”

Republican legislators also drew up highly partisan Congressional and state legislative redistricting maps in secret, and rammed them through the legislature within ten days of unveiling them to the public. In a classic gerrymandering “pack and stack” move, African American and Latino voters in Milwaukee are crammed into fewer solidly Democratic districts. Said state senator Lena Taylor of the maps: “This is a violation of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.”

One of the great civil rights struggles in Milwaukee was over fair housing, and now Walker and the Republicans are poised to pass a bill that, according to a nonpartisan legislative council lawyer, “may make it easier for landlords to discriminate and break fair housing laws.” It allows landlords to reject an applicant based on low income or a criminal record that has nothing to do with housing. It also allows them to require three months’ rent in advance, among other provisions.

“We’re going back forty, fifty, sixty years,” says state representative Leon Young, who sits on the Assembly Housing Committee. “We’re going back and undoing what fair housing was passed to correct in the first place. People of color were not able to get housing.”

Walker’s systematic divestment from K-12 public education will also disproportionately affect minorities.

“The majority party is forgetting that there is a little thing called the state constitution that says that all children have a right to free, quality

public education,” says state representative Tamara Grigsby, a member of the Joint Finance Committee. “The \$1.6 billion in budget cuts to education will have the most impact on areas that already don’t have access to what they need.”

“This budget sets back kids at least a generation,” adds state senator Coggs. “This is the first time we haven’t put at least some increase in funding for education. It sets up some very negative outcomes for kids of color.”

The budget cuts \$1.6 billion from K-12 education over the next two years. It also adds provisions expanding the private school voucher system to Racine. This “school choice” system allows public school children from Milwaukee—and now Racine—to attend private schools, and have taxpayer funds pay the private school a lump sum out of the school district budget.

This program began in 1990 as a bipartisan initiative between then-governor Tommy Thompson and Democratic African American state representative Annette Polly Williams. They saw private school vouchers for low-income kids from Milwaukee as a way to address one of the worst disparities in educational achievement between African American children and their white counterparts in the nation.

Williams quickly became disillusioned with the school-choice movement when it began pushing to expand the program to all families—not just low-income, minority kids. “I knew from the beginning that white Republicans and rich, rightwing foundations that praised me and used me to validate their agenda would do it only as long as it suited their needs,” Williams told the *Boston Globe* back in 1998. She added, “Too many people in the voucher crowd exploit low-income black children.”

The 2011-13 budget not only expands the voucher program to allow more children access, it also increases

the income caps on families eligible for vouchers, and allows private schools outside of Milwaukee and Racine to participate in the program. Even Howard Fuller, former Milwaukee public schools superintendent and champion of the voucher program, is dismayed by this provision. "Please don't make it true that you were just using the poor to eventually make this available to the rich," he pleaded at a budget hearing in Milwaukee.

Additionally, a bill that opens the door to for-profit charter school franchises to operate without local school district approval is making its way through the legislature. SB 22 has the potential to privatize whatever is left of local school districts. Taken together, these changes jeopardize the main chance many African American kids have to get ahead in the public schools.

When Dot Williams entered school in Copiah County, Mississippi, in the 1940s, *Plessy v. Ferguson* was still the law of the land. What a "separate but equal" education meant for Dot was a single teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. That's where the children of African American sharecroppers went. Families provided firewood and other material needs for the school, supported by "box dinner" fundraisers. They borrowed tattered, outdated books from the neighboring white school district.

Dot and her husband, Will, left Mississippi and raised their family in Chicago and Wisconsin. Their grandchildren graduated from public schools in Madison in the 1980s and 1990s when they were still adequately resourced. Since then, they have seen what years of cuts to education, No Child Left Behind, and Race to the Top "accountability" schemes have done to destroy a once-thriving school system that had managed to serve African American kids decently.

They saw some African American community leaders respond to the crisis in public school funding by

backing conservative proposals for vouchers and charter schools. These people acted "like bass jumping at a shiny lure," says Will Williams.

Walker's most high-profile assault on the people of Wisconsin has been against public sector workers. Wisconsin Act 10, the so-called Budget Repair Bill that brought tens of thousands of people into the streets and into the capitol for three straight weeks last spring, eliminates mean-

A new law prohibits local law enforcement agencies from collecting data for purposes of studying the issue of racial profiling.

ingful collective bargaining with public sector unions and forces austerity measures—such as increased employee contributions to pension and health insurance plans—on state, county, and municipal workers. This, too, has a racial edge.

According to a recent study by Steven Pitts of the U.C. Berkeley Center for Labor Research and Education, the public sector is the single most important source of employment for African Americans. "During 2008-2010, 21.2 percent of all black workers are public employees, compared with 16.3 percent of non-black workers," the report said. "The public sector is a critical source of decent-paying jobs for black Americans."

In Wisconsin, these trends are similar.

"Black people depend upon public sector employment to a greater extent than any other group in Wisconsin,"

says Bill Franks, equal opportunity officer at the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development. African Americans make up 6 percent of the population, and the unemployment rate for African Americans is 25 percent.

African Americans are represented at a 20 percent higher rate as state workers than they are in the overall workforce. Additionally, within state government they are more highly represented in the positions that tend to be unionized, with nearly one in three working in the Department of Corrections. Most of these are AFSCME members who will see cuts to their already-depressed wages.

The most overtly racist move by Walker was to gut the recently enacted law against racial profiling.

In 1999, Governor Tommy Thompson convened a task force on racial profiling which recommended that local law enforcement agencies improve complaint procedures, gather data, and conduct in-service trainings to prevent racial profiling. Eight years later, Governor Jim Doyle created the Commission on Reducing Racial Disparities in the Wisconsin Justice System. The findings of that commission were translated into an executive order and finally into a law that mandated data collection on traffic stops as a small step toward addressing the issue of racial profiling.

No sooner had that law gone into effect than Republicans drafted another bill to not only repeal the state-mandated data collection, but actually prohibit local law enforcement agencies from collecting data for purposes of studying the issue of racial profiling in traffic stops or any other situations in which people come into contact with the criminal justice system.

Representative Grigsby served on Governor Doyle's commission. During debate on the assembly floor she reflected on that experience: "This

was a very well thought-out attempt to address a real racial justice issue. Why wouldn't we want to examine our practices when we have some of the highest rates of disproportionate minority confinement in the country? Are you afraid of finding out that racism might be real? This bill erases years of work and progress in creating a more racially just state."

She added: "It is unbelievable that such a large body of people could have such disregard for others' civil rights. I challenge the authors of this bill to explain how making it acceptable to target, harass, and profile people based on the color of their skin is part of the common good."

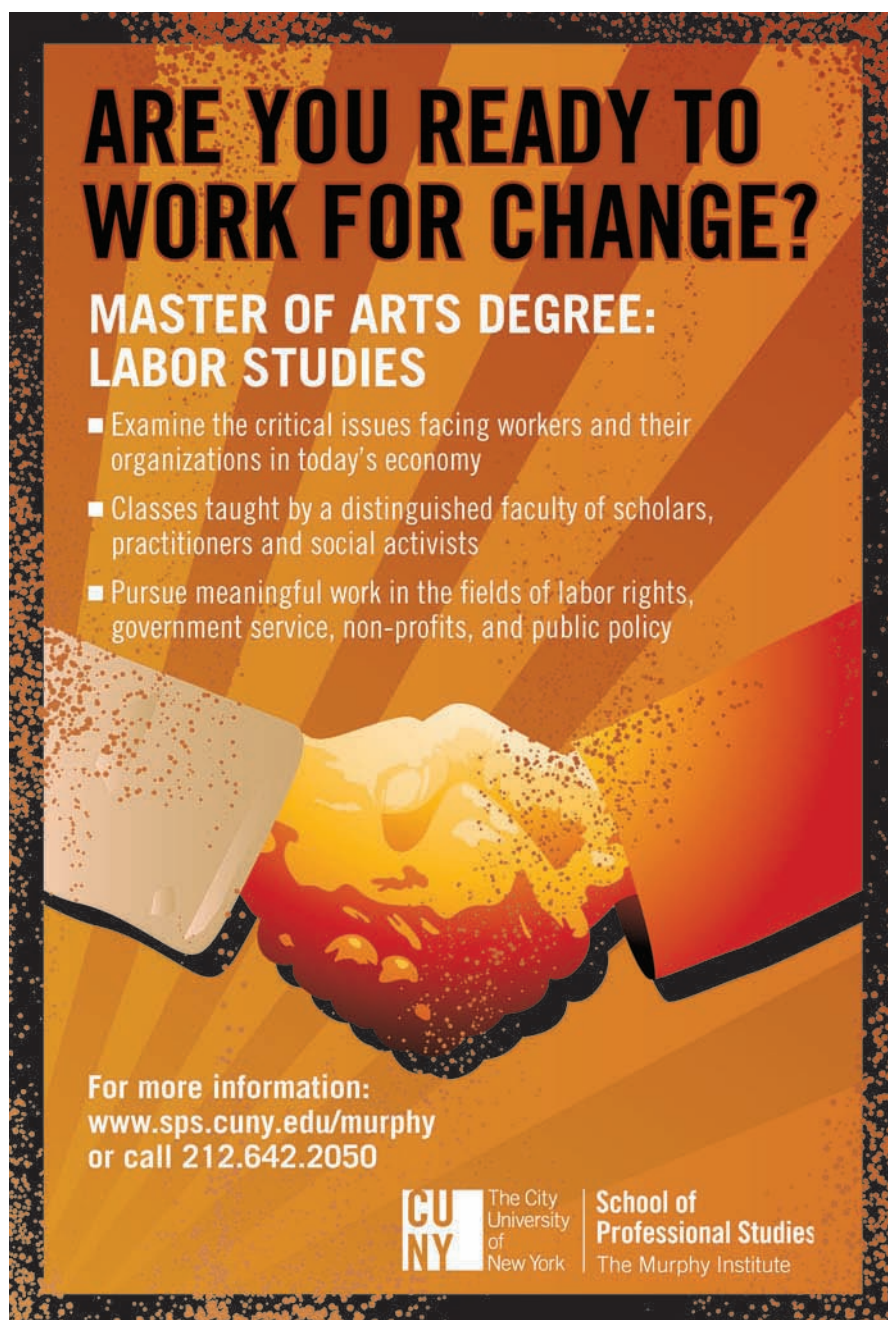
On April 4, Jesse Jackson was back in Madison with AFSCME Local 1733 members Elmore Nickleberry and Baxter Richard Leach, whose struggle in Memphis forty-three years ago occasioned the ill-fated visit from Martin Luther King Jr. At a rally on the capitol steps, Jackson noted, "Forty-three years after the assassination of Dr. King, the states' rights forces are back, attacking our rights, attacking our ability to organize, our ability to have a voice in the workplace, our ability to maintain our public services and our public schools. They want to turn back the clock fifty years on civil rights, seventy-five years on worker rights. And we just can't let them do it."

Margaret Rozga is deeply concerned about the forces behind this rightwing agenda. She's a veteran of the Freedom Summer voter registration drives in Alabama and spent 200 days in 1967-68 marching for fair housing in Milwaukee as part of the NAACP Youth Council. "I'm afraid that this legislature is rolling back to a much earlier time—maybe they're even imagining a scenario that's something we haven't seen before," she says. Part of this scenario is the creation of a low-wage pool through union-busting and the increased use of prison labor, she adds.

During the budget debate, state senator Jauch observed, "For 163 years, Wisconsin has been a beacon. It has been a model of good government. It has set the standard for the rest of the nation for how we educate our children, how we care for our neighbors, how we show respect for our elderly. The nation's moral compass always pointed to Wisconsin. As a result of this budget, Wisconsin's moral compass now points

to Mississippi."

Dot Williams doesn't want to go back there. Recalling her experiences growing up in Jim Crow Mississippi, she reflects, "If you don't stand up, people will walk all over you." Speaking of the eventual passage of fair housing ordinances in Milwaukee, Rozga adds, "When you do resist, you put forces in motion that pay off in ways that you can't foresee." ♦



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