



**ROSA  
LUXEMBURG  
STIFTUNG**  
NEW YORK OFFICE

# TO BEGIN THE WORLD OVER AGAIN

A Politics of Wisconsin, Occupy and the Next Left

By John Nichols

## Table of Contents

Lessons From Wisconsin. By the Editors.....1

### **To Begin The World Over Again**

**A Politics of Wisconsin, Occupy and the Next Left** .....2

By John Nichols

Wisconsin's Radical History.....3  
The Birth of A Mass Movement.....4  
The Dominance of "Money Power" .....5  
From Cairo to Madison.....7  
Dedicated Republicans, Lame Democrats.....9  
Lessons for the Left.....11  
There Is No Such Thing As A Humane Austerity.....14  
Starting-points for the Next Left.....15  
Wisconsin and Occupy Are Only the Beginning.....16

Published by the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office, October 2012

**Editors:** Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg

**Address:** 275 Madison Avenue, Suite 2114, New York, NY 10016

**Email:** info@rosalux-nyc.org; **Phone:** +1 (917) 409-1040

The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation is an internationally operating, progressive non-profit institution for civic education. In cooperation with many organizations around the globe, it works on democratic and social participation, empowerment of disadvantaged groups, alternatives for economic and social development, and peaceful conflict resolution.

The New York Office serves two major tasks: to work around issues concerning the United Nations and to engage in dialogue with North American progressives in universities, unions, social movements and politics.

**[www.rosalux-nyc.org](http://www.rosalux-nyc.org)**

## Lessons From Wisconsin

The Wisconsin uprising of 2011 and 2012 mobilized hundreds of thousands, thereby producing the largest mass protest of pro-union activists in modern American history. It did, however, not begin in a vacuum. Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker happened to announce his sweeping assault on labor rights—basically stripping the public employees' union of its bargaining rights—on the same day that Hosni Mubarak stepped down after thirty years as the Egyptian dictator.

While most of America's narrow gauge media missed the connection, Wisconsinites got it. The right response to overt oppression is not to wait for the next election. Rather it is to go to the square, go to the capitol, to occupy public space, to remain where you are not wanted and to invite others to join the fight.

But just as the events in Egypt proved to be less transformative than those who packed Tahrir Square had hoped, the Wisconsin movement also struggled to move from the street to the electoral sphere. There were, to be sure, remarkable victories. Using direct democracy tools inserted in the state constitution a century before by progressive reformers, the movement forced anti-labor legislators to face "recall" elections. So many were removed from office that control of the state Senate shifted from Walker's Republicans to Democrats committed to defending public workers, public services and public education.

Wisconsin's romantic revolutionaries, who proved to have considerably more practical skills than most mainstream liberals, scared the wits out of politicians and billionaire campaign donors. And when the mass movement came for Walker, the economic elites rallied nationwide behind the Tea Party hero. Walker had an 8-1 spending advantage over his Democratic challenger in the recall election; he won by a 53-47 margin. But that did not end what began in Wisconsin and has since extended to other states and the Occupy movement.

With the first rounds of the struggle over, John Nichols, renowned journalist and author of "Uprising: How Wisconsin Renewed the Politics of Protest, from Madison to Wall Street" (Nation Books: 2012), evaluates lessons from historic radical leaders to provide perspective on the narrow prospects of electoral politics and the broader possibilities of movement politics. He argues that the U.S. has not seen such a prolonged period of street-based and electoral activism on the left in decades. But the translation of such mass movement politics from the streets to polling places will not be easy. It will require fundamental structural reforms, which in turn will require years of radical activism, just as the translation of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s from the streets of the South to the corridors of power took many difficult years. Thus the real future of the U.S. will be decided in a non-violent struggle between those who, from Wisconsin to Occupy Wall Street, embrace a new politics of protest that is as much physical as electoral, and those who would maintain an old and increasingly corrupt order.

*Stefanie Ehmsen and Albert Scharenberg  
Co-Directors of New York Office, October 2012*

# To Begin The World Over Again

## A Politics of Wisconsin, Occupy and the Next Left

By Johns Nichols

The great philosopher of hope in the dark, Rebecca Solnit, tells us that the revolutionary impulse is always present, looking for an avenue, an outlet, a movement to bring it from the shadows to the public square and the corridors of power. "But that desire is still out there," Solnit observed some years ago.

*It's the force behind a huge new movement we don't even have a name for yet, a movement that's not a left opposed to a right, but perhaps a below against above, little against big, local and decentralized against consolidated. If we could throw out the old definitions, we could recognize where the new alliances lie; and those alliances—of small farmers, of factory workers, of environmentalists, of the poor, of the indigenous, of the just, of the farseeing—could be extraordinarily powerful against the forces of corporate profit and institutional violence.*

Solnit is, of course, correct. Even at the lowest points for the global left, there comes the news of a bicycle brigade riding across India on behalf of socialism, of a Latin American peasant leader being sworn in as president, of African environmentalists beating back corporate agribusiness, of a marginal Greek party riding a wave of anger over austerity measures into status as the official opposition, of radicals taking places in the governments of German cities and states.

But how often does the news come from America? No, not the manufactured "hope" of Barack Obama's election as an able if uninspired managerial Democrat but the hope of which Solnit speaks, of below against above, of little against big.

Not often. Not often at all. And that is why the images of hundreds of thousands of union members and their allies surrounding and then occupying the capitol of the American state of Wisconsin in the first months of 2011, and then building a movement that continues to inspire militant activism in that state and others across the country, remain so striking.

Those images beg a question: If there is room for radicalism in the belly of the beast, in the heart of the country that so dominates the global economy and the political and military affairs of the planet, then is there not room for radicalism everywhere? Might it be that another world really is possible?

At the most fundamental level, this is why what has happened in Wisconsin and America over the past many months matters far beyond the borders of any state or the country itself. That a measure of hope in the dark might come from America is meaningful because America has not, of late, been in the business of inspiring revolutionary or radical faith.

For several decades now, as the great British parliamentarian Tony Benn and I have conducted our annual surveys of the political landscape of the planet, what continually struck me was the fact that Benn, the Brit, was more confident about America's radical potential than I, the native son. We both were well aware of America's radical history: a nation called into being by the pamphleteer Tom Paine, forged in revolution against the British Empire, nurtured by French

Fourierists and German '48ers who brought socialist and communist ideas to a new land, strengthened by strains of homegrown populist, progressive, Christian socialist, social democratic and anarcho-syndicalist agitation; with promises made real by pioneering civil rights, women's rights, LGBT and environmental movements.

But, as the era of Bush-Cheney corporatist extremism gave way to the medium-cool compromises of Barack Obama and a Democratic Party more interested in managing markets than in changing or supplanting them, it was rather too easy to imagine that America no longer had any propensity toward radicalism. At least not on the left. Almost a century had passed since the great Socialist Party advances of the 1910s. Organized labor had been in decline for 50 years. And the mass movements of the 1960s seemed no more real and relevant than the mass movements of the 1860s. It wasn't just a matter of stalled progress; the progressive accomplishments of the previous century were under attack by a new generation of right-wing Republicans who made no secret of their de-

sire to dismantle not just the "Great Society" of the last president who actually tried to address economic injustice in anything akin to a meaningful way, Lyndon Johnson, but the "New Deal" of the greatest progressive president of the modern era, Franklin Roosevelt. The extreme right's ascendance, so rapid and so thorough in the state and national elections of 2010, had created a circumstance where even Democrats were starting to sound like the European bankers preaching austerity agendas.

February of 2011 was a dark moment for America and, in light of America's economic and military power, for the world. It was an even darker moment for my relationship with Tony Benn because I was going to have to tell him, once and for all, that America was veering right with such force and certainty that he was simply going to have to surrender his romantic notions about any lingering revolutionary spirit in the United States.

Then, in the winter of our discontent, came Wisconsin.

## **Wisconsin's Radical History**

In the middle of the American continent, up along the northern borders where German and Scandinavian immigrants had forged the most distinct of American states, an uprising stirred. The impetus was a move by Republican Governor Scott Walker to rewrite laws governing public-sector unions so that they could no longer engage in meaningful collective bargaining on behalf of their members. Indeed, under the governor's plan, unions were denied the ability to collect dues as they traditionally had and forced to reorganize themselves on an annual basis. In short, Walker was attempting to render public-sector unions so dysfunctional that they could not realistically advocate on behalf

of their members—or on behalf of needed public services—in workplaces or in the politics of the state and nation.

Walker was not doing this in a southern state with a history of racial segregation, stark economic inequality and the anti-union sentiment so frequently associated with those patterns of division. Walker was doing this in Wisconsin, a historically progressive state where the country's largest public-sector union, the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, was founded in 1932, and where collective-bargaining rights for public employees were first formally recognized in 1959.

Because of Wisconsin's unique history, there was an instant understanding that if Walker's attack on organized labor were to succeed there, then the assault on the public sector—not just the unions, but the services and the very sense that communities, states and nations must do some things in common—could spread to any corner of the United States. And a country that had never resolved the great debate between social democracy and free-market fundamentalism, let alone the debate between socialism and capitalism, might finally tip so far to the right that renewal of the body politic could become unimaginable.

Needless to say, serious issues were at stake in 2011. Needless to say, serious issues remain very much at stake to this day.

This is how to understand the Wisconsin up-

rising, as well as the uprisings in other states that extended from it, and the Occupy Wall Street movement that—while influenced by many streams of dissent and discontent—was nudged into being by the developments of the first months of 2011.

While the Wisconsin uprising may have had its roots in specific causes for concern, it was never merely a revolt against a particular policy or a particular politician. It was, and is, an uprising against the the whole lie of austerity and against the whole of our corrupt and compromised politics. An uprising that generated the largest mass mobilization on behalf of workers rights in modern American history. A class-conscious, diverse and, above all, radical response to the drift not just of one state but of a nation, via the lie of austerity, toward the abyss of free-market absolutism.

## **The Birth of A Mass Movement**

Nothing could have prepared even the most optimistic organizer for what happened in Wisconsin and beyond during the course of 2011 and 2012. In fact, too much preparation would have spoiled the moment, and the movement. What happened in Wisconsin was spontaneous: teachers and students leaving their classrooms first to march on their Capitol and then to occupy it, police commanders and their deputies refusing to disperse demonstrators who were exercising their right to assemble and to petition for the redress of grievances, previously cautious Democratic legislators walking out of the Capitol and refusing to participate in the implementation of an austerity agenda. The sheer number of demonstrators—more than 150,000 on the streets of a capital city of 200,000, and tens of thousands more in smaller cities and towns across the state—and

the refusal of those who were protesting, occupying and demanding new elections to stop, was unprecedented.

And it remains unprecedented. The story of what will happen in Wisconsin, and by extension of what will happen in other states and a nation that is very much in flux, remains unfinished. Mass mobilizations have surged, and faded, and surged again. Elections have produced victories and defeats—most notably, the heartbreaking failure of the Wisconsin movement to force right-wing Governor Scott Walker out of office. But the import of what has taken place in Wisconsin and America since the first demonstrators marched into the streets in February, 2011, is never going to be measured by a single mobilization or a single election result. Something fundamental has changed. A mass move-

ment politics, so long missing from the America landscape, and so seemingly out of reach in a time of corporate dominance and media manipulation, has taken shape.

Wisconsin begat Ohio, where unions and their allies succeeded in turning back a move by another Republican governor to strip union members of basic rights. And Wisconsin and Ohio begat movements in other states that have become so common that Americans are starting to get the meaning of BBC economics editor Paul Mason's book title: "Why It's Kicking Off Everywhere." The burgeoning activism remained unnamed, and even to some extent unexplained, until the "Occupy Wall Street" movement defined it as an explicitly anti-corporate, anti-corruption, anti-crony capitalism movement that threw off the apathy so beneficial to elites and pitted a focused and furious 99 percent against a suddenly embattled 1 percent.

The American labor movement, which after decades of decline had seemed to be unable or unwilling to fight, was suddenly fighting. When students occupied the state Capitol in Madison, Wisconsin, they found themselves sleeping on the marble floors next to the presidents of international unions. When New York officials tried to force Occupy Wall Street protesters from

the parks and streets of Lower Manhattan, city workers flooded into the financial center of the United States to defend the newly-taken ground. The head of the Service Employees International Union, one of the largest and most powerful of labor organizations in the world, did not just express solidarity. She was arrested with members of the New York City Council, neighborhood leaders and students who demanded not just a new politics but a new economics.

Right-wing commentators gripe openly now that socialist and social-democratic ideas seem to be popping up everywhere in America. The radio reactionaries don't get much correct. But they are correct about this. The next left that is developing in America may not be explicitly socialist in its thinking. But it is dramatically more at peace with socialist ideas than left-wing movements of the recent past, which tended toward the ideological caution of those who had experienced the Cold War and the era when right-wing Senator Joe McCarthy and his acolytes condemned even moderate reformers as "Communists."

On the streets, in the union halls, in the occupied parks and capitols, it is easy to sense the optimism. To think that some unseen switch has been flipped and that the next left won't be "next" for long—that it might be arriving.

## **The Dominance of "Money Power"**

But it is never quite that easy. Not in the United States. There are profound challenges, both economic and political, which will constrain and complicate that progress. And it's better to identify them at the start rather than to let them remain unrecognized—or under-recognized—until the right plays its hand. To wit:

1. America has an almost fully corrupted political process, where candidates and parties rely

on campaign money "donated" by the wealthy and corporate interests. Billions of dollars are spent on endless campaigns that are, more often than not, won by political players who defer to the demands of "the money power" that populist campaigners of a century ago named and decried.

Because American campaigns are essentially marketing initiatives, with the purpose of in-

fluencing opinion through massive broadcast, digital and direct-mail messaging, even a movement that attains significant strength on the street can experience electoral defeat at the polls. And voters who should support their self-interest can end up casting ballots based on cynical campaigns of overt deception and covert manipulation of public opinion.

A series of recent decisions by a U.S. Supreme Court that is dominated by right-wing justices has made it dramatically easier for corporations to define the direction of election campaigns, while at the same time making it dramatically harder for labor unions to engage in politics. Just as the labor movement is renewing itself—with a boost from the Occupy movement—unions are more legally and politically constrained than at any time since the 1930s.

2. Even if the “money power” did not define American election campaigns as essentially conservative affairs, structures would. National, state and local elections in the United States are, for the most part, decided on the basis of “first-past-the-post” elections between Democratic and Republican candidates. Unlike in most European countries, where the political structures encourage at least some measure of multi-party democracy, U.S. elections are defined structurally and practically by two parties—one far right; one, at best, centrist; both deferent to corporate power—that dominate the finances, the media coverage and the debates.

America has alternative parties, most notably the Green Party, which plays a principled role in national, state and local politics. The Greens and other groupings such as the New York Working Families Party and the Vermont Progressive Party have attained marginal success in some cities and regions. But the two-party grip on the political process and skewed media coverage of that process makes it much harder in the United States than in other countries for movement politics to translate from the streets to the

ballot boxes. Nothing serves the economic and political status quo so thoroughly as do political structures that narrow debates and choices. This stifles the translation of movement politics into electoral forces, except and unless movements enter major parties and take control of their nominating processes—as, to some extent, the conservative “Tea Party” movement has with the Republican Party.

3. The American media that should serve as a counterbalance to political and money power is too frequently a stenographer to power. American media, overwhelmingly privately-owned and defined by commercial pressures, has always tended to reinforce corporate messaging and conservative approaches with regard to economic debates.

And it is worse now, at least as regards broadcast and print media, which have seen their revenues dwindle in the face of digital competition. American newsrooms are collapsing and in many instances disappearing. Hundreds of daily and weekly newspapers have gone out of business in recent years; cities as large as Seattle and Denver have seen the end of newspaper competition; New Orleans recently lost its print daily newspaper, and other communities across the country face the prospect of similar closures.

Television “news” programs tend to provide more coverage of sports, weather and lifestyle concerns than actual news. And news cable channels provide very little actual news and very much commentary on the news. Similarly, Internet websites that are supposed to cover the news are so poorly financed that they have few if any reporters; as such, they entertain hyperbolic discussions about what has always happened but do little to advance the flow of information.

To the extent that a message does come from American media, it is, for the most part, a

preaching of free-market absolutist doctrines that suggests the only real response to economic doldrums is to balance budgets with assaults on the pay and benefit packages of public employees and deep cuts in public services.

4. America is a very large and very divided country. Patterns of suburban development have placed wide swaths of the nation's population in communities where it is difficult to do traditional organizing, and in regions where unions and activists groupings have limited capacity. This narrows the range of movement for the left. While the Democratic Party leans well to the left in San Francisco or Detroit, it is exceptionally conservative in some southern and western states. And Democratic mayors and governors are often just as friendly as Republicans to austerity agendas of cuts in services and attacks on public services.

This means that, while localized and regional movements can go far to the left in specific debates, it is exceptionally difficult to develop traction for national movements. And the daunting task of linking movements from region to region and state to state is made all the more difficult by the lack of clearly-defined political

grouping—let alone a muscular party of the left—that can keep the momentum growing.

Against all the obstacles, however, something is taking shape. The movement politics that is developing on the left does not exist merely in outline or strategic hope. It is real. From Wisconsin to Ohio to Occupy, a change has taken place on the left in the United States. And it is a change for the better. But it is not necessarily a change that will renew left politics—or that will redefine American politics as anything more humane or functional than what has been known in recent decades. The next left that is developing is very much a work in progress. And much of that progress will be shaped by factors beyond the United States, as this next American left is shaped not merely by American radical traditions but by global connections.

The American left has only occasionally been so inclined as its European and Asian counterparts toward genuine embraces of “international solidarity.” But the next American left had its roots in an understanding of global solidarity that is perhaps the most inspired—if under-recognized—in recent American history. So let's begin there.

## **From Cairo to Madison**

The Wisconsin uprising did not begin in a vacuum. Governor Walker announced his sweeping assault on labor rights and local democracy on the same day that Hosni Mubarak stepped down after thirty years as the Egyptian dictator in president's clothing. What had taken Mubarak down? Not diplomacy or military threats from afar. Not economic crisis, although the times were bad. Not an election, as he and his associates controlled the electoral processes of Egypt. Mubarak was forced from office by a mass mobilization that went to

Tahrir Square in Cairo, that remained there day after day, that finally won the respect of at least some elements of the elites, and of the military and security forces, and that suddenly became inevitable.

On the evening of the first mass mobilization in Madison to protest Walker's policies, I was invited to speak at a rally of teachers and students where an incredible crowd gathered at an entrance to the Capitol and extended down the steps and across the great lawn. Where in the

past, a few hundred might have shown up for such a protest, thousands had come. As I waited to speak, I found myself standing next to a state employee who was holding a sign with a message in Arabic. I had covered the Gulf War and the Intifada, reported from the West Bank and Israel, Jordan and other countries of the Middle East. So I greeted him: "assalamu alaikum." He replied, "I don't speak Arabic." Pointing to the sign, I said, "You can understand my confusion, brother." "Oh, that," he responded. "I went online to do the translation. It says: 'If Egypt Can Get Rid of Hosni Mubarak, Wisconsin Can Get Rid of Scott Walker.'"

While most of America's narrow-gauge media missed the connection, Wisconsinites got it. The right response to overt oppression, to an assault on basic rights, is not to wait for the next election. That cedes not just the moment but the potential for a consolidation of power to officeholders and their financial sponsors. The right response is to go to the square, go to the capitol, to occupy, to remain where you are not wanted, to raise the banner of resistance and invite others to rally around it.

This was not, of course, merely an Egyptian lesson. But Egypt had most recently "spoken the password primeval and given the sign of democracy"—to paraphrase the poet Walt Whitman. It had given the world an example of the politics of protest, and Wisconsin carried that example forward. This, in turn, excited others in America and around the world, so that, by the time Rage Against the Machine guitarist Tom Morello swept into Madison in February, 2012, he carried with him a letter from Egyptian activist Amor Eletebi. "To our friends in Madison, Wisconsin," read the missive from Eletebi:

*I wish you could see firsthand the change we have made here. Justice is beautiful, but justice is never free. The beauty of Tahrir Square you can have everywhere, on any corner, in any city, or in your heart. So hold on tightly and don't let go. [...] Breathe deep, Wisconsin, because justice is in the*

*air. And may the spirit of Tahrir Square be in every beating heart in Madison today.*

Morello yelled to the thousands of students and union members who surrounded him on the floor of the Capitol rotunda, "Madison is the next Cairo." In almost every sense, he was right. Using the essential tools of social media and radical messages that owed more to the anti-fascist fighters of the 1930s than the soft stances of contemporary campaigners, Wisconsin activists called their comrades to the streets day after day, in ever increasing numbers. The mass protests that saw thousands of Wisconsinites occupy the state Capitol for three weeks, that saw hundreds of thousands surround the Capitol and fill the streets of the city, that saw Democratic legislators abandon compromise and cooperation in favor of a stand with the protesters, shook a state and a nation and inspired the world. At Ian's Pizza, a restaurant near the Capitol that began delivering food to the occupiers, calls began to come in from across the country; Americans who were watching on television phoned in orders for delivery of pizzas to the students and the union members. Soon, there had been calls from all fifty American states. Then from more than 60 countries and every continent—even Antarctica. Finally, several weeks into the mobilization, a woman at Ian's picked up the phone and took an order from the head of the union that represented workers on the Suez Canal. The global kicking off had come full circle.

But so, too, would the hard lessons of movements that begin so romantically. Just as the transformation of Egypt proved to be less transformative than those who packed Tahrir Square had hoped it might be, so the Wisconsin movement struggled to move from the street to the competition for power that plays out in the electoral sphere. There were, to be sure, remarkable victories. Using direct democracy tools that had been inserted in the state Constitution a century earlier by progressive reform-

ers, the movement forced anti-labor legislators to face new “recall” elections. So many of them were removed from office that control of the upper house of the state legislator shifted from Walker’s Republicans to Democrats who were committed to defending public workers, public services and public education.

Wisconsin’s romantic revolutionaries—who proved to have considerably more practical skills than most mainstream liberals—scared the wits out of the politicians and the billionaire campaign donors who presumed that the “money power” would always protect them. And when the mass movement came for Walker, forcing him to face the voters anew (not at the next scheduled election but in a special election scheduled at the demand of the citizenry), the prospect of his removal was significant enough to inspire a national rallying of the economic elites.

One of the truly unfortunate characteristics of movement politics, particularly movement politics that proposes a radical turn, is the extent to which the whole of any movement’s grasping for power is reduced to the result of a single election. This makes no practical sense. Few elections in history have decided the fate of a state or nation, and those that have been of such consequence have rarely decided things for the good.

Serious progressives recognize as much. Unfortunately, serious progressives, let alone serious radicals, are rarely positioned within the media to put political results in perspective.

## **Dedicated Republicans, Lame Democrats**

The failure of the campaign against Walker, while frustrating for Wisconsin union families and the great activist movement that developed to counter the governor and his policies,

Now that the first rounds of Wisconsin elections are done, however, we can consider what happened, and we can use the lessons of historic radical leaders to provide perspective—not just on the narrow prospects of electoral politics, but on the broad prospects of movement politics.

Robert M. La Follette, the architect of the progressive movement that a century ago made Wisconsin—until then a relatively obscure mid-western state—into America’s “laboratory of democracy,” recognized that experiments in empowerment would at times go awry.

*We have long rested comfortably in this country upon the assumption that because our form of government was democratic, it was therefore automatically producing democratic results. Now, there is nothing mysteriously potent about the forms and names of democratic institutions that should make them self-operative.*

La Follette observed after suffering more than his share of defeats. “Tyranny and oppression are just as possible under democratic forms as under any other.”

Those words echoed across the decades on the night of June 5, 2012, as the Wisconsin movement that had employed the most powerful of the accountability tools developed in La Follette’s laboratory—the right to petition for new elections that might force errant officials from their positions—proved insufficient for the removal of Governor Walker.

offered profound lessons not just for Wisconsin but for a nation that is wrestling with fundamental questions about how to counter corporate and conservative power in a moment

when the U.S. Supreme Court's decisions have guaranteed that money will dominate American politics. Those lessons are daunting, even terrifying, as they suggest that the "money power" that populists and progressives of another era identified as the greatest threat to democracy has now organized itself as a force that cannot be easily thwarted even by the most determined "people power."

There is no question that the Wisconsin result—which followed a campaign that saw Walker outspend his Democratic challenger by perhaps 8-1, as the governor's billionaire backers flooded the state with tens of millions of dollars in "independent" expenditures on his behalf—should send up red flares for progressives in the United States (and perhaps internationally as the U.S. tends to export its political pathologies).

America's extreme right-wing political players have developed a far more sophisticated money-in-politics template than has ever before been employed. They tested that template in Wisconsin, on behalf of a deeply-divisive and scandal-plagued governor, and they succeeded.

But the quick calculus that says a new order of organized money will invariably beat organized people misses the fact that the labor, farm, student and community activists who forged the movement to depose "the imperial Walker" were also experimenting. They made mistakes, particularly as regards messaging. Yet, they knew more about where American politics should be headed than the professional politicians. Indeed, their biggest mistake was to cede control of the fight, at too many levels, to Democratic political operatives who did not know how to mount a movement-based or movement-themed campaign.

The Wisconsin movement was let down by national Democratic players who never quite recognized that Republican National Commit-

tee chairman Reince Priebus and former Bush White House political czar Karl Rove were testing and perfecting strategies for the November, 2012, U.S. elections—and that those who will compete with the RNC and Rove's Crossroads complex should have been doing the same. But even as national Democrats failed to "get" Wisconsin, the Wisconsin movement figured some things out on its own.

The defeat that the Wisconsin movement suffered in the recall election was not total, nor was it overwhelming. More than 47 percent of Wisconsinites voted to remove a "right-wing rock star" whose reelection became the top priority of the Republican party, the conservative movement and the 1 percent billionaires who made Walker's reelection a national priority.

For those who see democracy as a spectator sport with clearly-defined seasons that finish on election day, the Wisconsin results were depressing as hell. But for those who recognize the distance Wisconsin—and other states, such as Ohio, which used a veto referendum to restore collective-bargaining rights—have come since the Republicans won just about everything in 2010, the Wisconsin recall still offered evidence of progress.

In some of the most important senses, remarkable progress.

Walker's February, 2011, assault on union rights provoked some of the largest mass demonstrations in modern labor history, protests that anticipated the "Occupy" phenomenon with a three-week takeover of the state Capitol and a now universally-embraced slogan: "Blame Wall Street Not the Workers." The protests both drew inspiration from and served to inspire the global kicking off against austerity.

Yet, the governor never backed away his self-declared "divide and conquer" agenda of attacking not just public-sector unions but public services

and public education. So there developed early on in Wisconsin a sense that the only way to stop Walker was to remove him from office using the “petition for the redress of grievances” power of recall, which allows citizens to gather a sufficient number of signatures to force a new election.

The Wisconsin recall vote was only the third for a state governor in American history. The previous two were organized by the right, with substantial corporate support. In Wisconsin, it was different. The labor movement and its allies forced the vote, relying on grassroots activists who gathered more than 900,000 signatures (over 40 percent of the electorate in the previous gubernatorial election) in every township, village and city of the state.

Walker’s response was to jet out of Wisconsin to Texas, Florida and California, on a fund-raising tour that would eventually collect more than \$35 million. That was more money than anyone running for any office in Wisconsin history had ever raised, and the money came overwhelmingly—more than 70 percent in the final filing—from out of state. That money was well spent; it framed a message rooted in fantasy and fabrication that suggested up was down, right was left and that his economic policies (which spawned the worst job losses in the nation) were “working.”

Walker’s economic policies didn’t work. But his advertisements did; they moved him up in the polls as Democrats and their allies were

struggling to identify a candidate to challenge him. And that poll advantage spooked national Democratic strategists, who got overly cautious about engaging with the Wisconsin struggle.

There was no caution on the other side; Republican National Committee chairman Priebus, a Wisconsin native, was always “all in,” as were the party’s top donors. And that mattered; Wisconsin law allowed Walker to collect unlimited amounts of money during the period before the recall election was formally scheduled. He pocketed piles of checks for as much as \$500,000. And the billionaires who weren’t donating to his campaign were setting up “independent” expenditures on his behalf—like the one that Joe Ricketts, a fabulously-wealthy online stockbroker who was caught scheming to wage a racially-charged campaign attacking President Obama, organized to defend Walker and attack the governor’s Democratic challenger.

There was plenty of speculation about whether things in Wisconsin would have been different if Obama, the national Democrats and their donors had gone all in for Tom Barrett. But that misses a deeper point; the unlimited spending that Republicans and their allies can now engage in is a new factor not just in Wisconsin politics but in American politics. And it has the potential to be definitional unless Democrats and progressives figure things out quickly. They should have been on the ground in Wisconsin not just to beat Walker but to get a read on where politics in America is headed in a new “money power” age.

## Lessons for the Left

The greatest danger, as always, is that the left will take the wrong messages away from a narrow defeat in a single election. The answer is not that Democrats and unions need to figure

out how to match Republican and corporate money. They can’t. So does Wisconsin then tell us that it’s over for progressive electoral politics of any kind in America? Not necessarily.

The Wisconsin result says that big money matters more—perhaps much more—now than it ever has in America politics. It can take a damaged candidate like Scott Walker and repurpose him as a winner. That's very good news for Republicans who often find themselves with damaged contenders. But it does not have to be the end of the story.

"Progressives don't have to have as much money as conservatives to compete in campaigns," says state Representative Fred Kessler, a Wisconsin Democrat who has been running campaigns for 50 years. "What they have to do is figure out how to spend the money they have in a way that counters the big money. And the way to do that is by framing the fight as something more than just a standard political campaign."

In Wisconsin, Democrats struggled with their message, trying to transition the radicalism of the Capitol protests of 2011—which took as their symbol a clenched "Solidarity" fist in the shape of the state—into the narrow confines of contemporary politics. It didn't work. Months of soft messaging about important issues—from education policy to voting rights—took some of the edge off the movement messaging that had defined the protests and the petitioning for the recall.

Workers' rights issues that were at the center of the protests were sidelined. As a result, polls showed that a third or more of voters who identified as coming from a "union household" voted for Walker. Private-sector unions found themselves scrambling in the weeks before the June 5 election to shore up a base that should have been secured from the start.

There was, as well, a huge problem with messaging as regards the recall itself. Walker's theme for the better part of year—reinforced in paid advertising and constant appearances on his favored national news network: Fox—was that the recall election was a costly partisan temper tantrum.

The criticism was never really countered by proponents of direct, people-centered democracy.

What could Democrats and the unions have done differently? They could have taken a portion of the millions they did spend on television ads attacking Walker—whose negatives were already high and who was taking regular media hits regarding a criminal investigation of his aides and donors—and spent it on early advertising to make the case for collective bargaining and the recall election.

American Democrats—like many of their European counterparts of the center-left—do a lousy job of framing debates, and that was certainly the case in Wisconsin. "A little bit of spending early makes the last stages of a campaign dramatically easier," says Steve Cobble, a veteran of Jesse Jackson's presidential campaign. Early spending to frame messages also allows a campaign with less money to get the most bang for its bucks. The same goes for unions and progressive interest groups.

Taking lessons from Wisconsin is important for progressives, as conservatives will be taking their lessons—most of which were about the power of big money to trump even mass movements. But the lesson that progressives must not take from Wisconsin is the theory that mass movements will never be able to beat big money.

Unions and their allies invested in mobilization of voters in Wisconsin's cities, especially African-American voters in Wisconsin cities such as Milwaukee and Racine. And it worked. Turnout was up dramatically, so much so that on election day election clerks had to be shifted to predominantly African-American wards to keep things running smoothly.

"You can't spend all your money on television. You've got to spend it on the ground," says Congresswoman Gwen Moore, a Wisconsin Democrat who represents Milwaukee.

*That's actually the most important thing to take away from Wisconsin. Investing on the ground got so many more Democratic voters to the polls. Even if it wasn't quite enough, people have to realize that's where you begin. And that's how you build the base for winning next time.*

And there will be a next time, not just in Wisconsin but nationally. The fight to remove Walker was a necessary, and credible, extension of the mass movements in the streets of Madison and other Wisconsin cities. That it did not succeed is disappointing. Deeply so. But it cannot be definitional.

Republicans will continue to push their austerity agendas, in Wisconsin and across America. And progressives have to get better at beating them, in the streets and at the polls. La Follette, the Wisconsin progressive pioneer who suffered more than his share of defeats before he started winning against the robber barons of his day, got it right—for his time, and ours. “We are slow to realize that democracy is a life; and involves continual struggle,” La Follette explained.

*It is only as those of every generation who love democracy resist with all their might the encroachments of its enemies that the ideals of representative government can even be nearly approximated.*

The mistake is to presume that La Follette was speaking only about electoral politics.

The American radicals of a century ago understood that politics could not begin and end at the polling place. American radicals of this century must do the same. It's time to end old debates about organizing versus elections, the street versus the ballot box, outside versus inside. America needs a whole left that can practice politics on every stage and at every level.

To do this, the next left in the United States, like the left everywhere, has to strike a better balance between the demands of mass mobilization and electioneering. The two initiatives are fundamentally different. But they are not

necessarily at odds. Indeed, in contemporary democratic states they cannot be.

The key is that better balance.

What worked about Wisconsin, from the start, was the mass mobilization. Those who participated in the demonstrations were changed, fundamentally and permanently. They came to see themselves as part of an uprising, and of the movement that sprang from it. That movement led to demands for a variety of interventions: general strikes, legal actions, organizing drives, electoral campaigns.

Because of the American penchant for addressing issues in the electoral theater—even when elections so rarely settle anything—the focus is shifting quickly and overwhelmingly toward electioneering.

Unfortunately, those interventions only served to prove the limits of American electoral politics. Where, then, should the next calculus take a movement that is still very much in the making? Not to simplistic calls for more organizing—although organizing is essential—or to a constant politics of mass mobilization. That is incomplete and insufficient in a democracy where issues of policy and direction are ultimately put to the voters.

But simply investing in the current electoral process is the politics of fools. The American electoral model has to change. The practical barriers forged by money and the rigid two-party structure makes the translation of movement politics into electoral politics difficult even when everything is done right, and there is no margin for error when the most powerful interests in the world—and all of their money—are on the other side.

So where does this lead movement makers?

Was Wisconsin just the western-most expression of the Arab Spring of 2011? Are we left with little

more than memories of great moments and a record of the disappointments that followed?

It doesn't have to be that way. The next left in the United States, and arguably the next left in the many prosperous nations where elites have determined that their best gambit will be a bru-

tally self-serving austerity agenda, must orient itself toward the future. It must be about shaping the future. It cannot play politics by the rules of the "money power" interests that have established a playing field on which they never lose.

Where to begin?

## **There Is No Such Thing As A Humane Austerity**

How about with what works? It is impossible to imagine a meaningful electoral politics coming before a meaningful mass mobilization. The inspiration from Wisconsin was the mass mobilization that filled the streets and the state Capitol with hundreds of thousands of citizens. So let's have more of that. Mobilizations have forced the hands of American local, state and national leaders, not just in the 1950s and 1960s, when Civil Rights, anti-war and environmental campaigners had so much influence but in recent years, when immigrant rights demonstrators have beaten back draconian proposals to penalize undocumented workers. Even when mass mobilizations do not force the hands of elected leaders, they build movements; rallies, marches, occupations and targeted initiatives are the single best way to bring people into the fight. They are dynamic and they focus previously disconnected activists on making specific demands.

But let's increase the "ask." The Wisconsin mobilization responded to an immediate threat and that helped to build the crowds. What the Occupy movement teaches us is that it is possible to build movements in America and beyond that are affirmative in their demands.

The demands can and should be defined as this movement evolves, but the one requirement is that they be radical. The extreme economic

right is offering not just the United States but the world a new order that redefines everything we know as a commercial endeavor, a "free-market" competition where those who start with a lead in the great race will always win. It is an absurd fantasy with an Orwellian twist that says the only way to respond to poverty is to make the rich richer. And it will not work. But by the time that the right's politics of fear and confusion has been exposed and undone, there may be little left to save. It is essential to counter the false promise of the right with a real promise—of equal magnitude—from the left.

The worst response to the right is the center-left promise that a Democratic Party in the United States, a Liberal Party in Canada, a Social Democratic Party in Germany can manage the mess made by conservative leaders in "kinder and gentler," vaguely more humane ways. There is no such thing as a humane austerity, just as there is no such thing as "shared sacrifice" when the wealthy control the decision-making process by which demands for sacrifices are made.

When budgets are drawn up, they either strive for the combination of equity and justice or for a redistribution of wealth upward that only increases inequity and injustice. To get beyond the lie of a middle way—recognizing as Tom Paine did that "a thing moderately good is not as good as it ought to be"—is to begin the pro-

cess of forging a next left agenda. Necessarily, Americans who reject corrupt compromises will, in a time when the forces of reaction use the broad brush to dismiss the forces of progress, be called “socialists.” So be it. The word

“socialist” cannot be accepted as an epithet by the left; if it is, then any and every idea that embraces or expands the commons runs the risk of being dismissed not on its merits but via the spin of the right.

## Starting-points for the Next Left

The next left in America can draw on socialist ideas from other lands, just as the American right imports European austerity agendas. But the next left can also draw on the rich history of American socialist, social-democratic, anarcho-syndicalist and independent radical thinking, and doing. Paine used his last great pamphlet, “Agarian Justice,” to outline a social welfare state that taxed the rich and redistributed their bounty to the poor. Karl Marx’s editor sat in the U.S. Congress in the 1840s. The Republican Party was founded by utopian socialists. The Socialist Party elected members to Congress a century ago, and Socialists served as mayors of the nation’s largest cities. Franklin Roosevelt consulted Socialist Norman Thomas about how to frame the New Deal. Socialists and Communists played critical roles in forming the nation’s largest labor unions and the civil rights movements. Democratic and Republican presidents consulted socialists, with longtime Democratic Socialists of America leader Michael Harrington serving as a counselor to several administrations in the days when America still imagined that the wealthiest nation in the world might end poverty.

The next left’s agenda may not be so recognizably socialistic, or social democratic, as past initiatives such as public education, public housing, postal banking, the Civilian Conservation Corps, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid. It can draw on new ideas, from libertarians and Pirate Parties, where they are expanding the definition of real freedom—as opposed to providing cover

for corporate power. It can adopt agendas that emphasize the decentralization of power, and the “slow” approach to politics and governing that has extended from the “slow food” movement into every sphere of human endeavor.

The next left can and should be as creative as the radical agendas that saw off monarchy, slavery, fascism, the oppression of women and the wanton destruction of natural resources. But creativity will never be enough. We live in an age when the best idea can go a long way, via Tweets and Facebook Friends. But so, too, can the worst fear and the biggest lie. And the power of mass media, by and large, still errs on the side of the fears and lies. So the necessity of developing and expanding the ability of the left to communicate becomes a first-order priority of any movement.

Fully utilizing new media tools is essential; indeed, there is no way that the Wisconsin mobilization or Occupy Wall Street would have come to pass without Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. But this is merely the beginning. The next left must invent its own media and it must recognize the necessity of investing as aggressively in messaging as in organizing. Simply knocking on the doors of working people who are battered 24/7 by media messages talking up austerity and shared sacrifice is not going to tip the balance. Working families need an engaged and engaging media that speaks to them, in all their languages, and in response to all of their concerns.

Media creation will require investment and support from institutions on the left, including unions that should spend less money funding old political parties and more money funding new media. But that will not be enough to counter corporate power. Ultimately, the funding of public and community broadcasting must be restructured to provide support for democracy-sustaining media that respects all viewpoints on the right and the left—not just the corporate line. Thus, media reform becomes an essential demand of next left movements.

Parallel to the demands for media reform must be demands for election reform. The United States has to tackle the “money power,” and that will not happen until a next left says that it is less important to win a particular election than it is to drive the moneychangers from the temples of power. And with the moneychangers must go the corrupt political structures and systems that prevent a multi-party politics that can begin to accurately approximate the will of the people. These campaigns for fundamental change will not simply be electoral; they will, necessarily, have mass mobilization and nonviolent civil disobedience components that take their lessons from the lessons of the civil rights movement in the United States and justice movements from South Africa to India to Burma.

Americans won't get “there” by looking inward. They never have. Americans are going to have to start learning lessons from other countries, including Germany where, for all the imperfections of its politics, the media and electoral

landscapes are far more diverse than in the U.S. Exchanges of ideas and strategies matter.

When Jean-Luc Melenchon left the French Socialist Party to form his country's Left Front, he freely acknowledged that he took his inspiration from the German Left Party. And he was right to do so. Americans should be thinking along similar lines, about developing new political groupings—perhaps parties, perhaps pressure groups with the outlines of parties but with greater flexibility—that will allow the next left to be as free as it chooses to be from the Democratic Party. Let the old-school pundits scratch their heads and try to figure whether what is taking shape is an issue campaign, a party, a mass movement or something more; whether it fits inside existing structures of whether it is shaping new structures; whether it is a primarily street-based mass mobilization or a savvy electoral machine. Let the next left take different forms in different cities and states. Let it focus on mobilizations and elections, with different levels of intensity at different times. Just make sure that all of the different local and regional manifestations of that next left are communicating with one another. And make sure that they are consistent in their realistic yet uncompromising approaches to challenges that demand radical responses.

It is easy, at times reassuringly so, to think of politics only in terms of established parties and elections. But the next American left must join the best of the global left in dreaming bigger dreams.

## **Wisconsin and Occupy Are Only the Beginning**

Tom Paine, whose *Common Sense* called America to revolution almost two centuries and a half ago, never sought elective office in the United States that owed its existence in no small part

to his interventions. Paine found that he did not fit well within the parties or political movements in his native England, his adopted America, his adopted France or wherever else the proud “cit-

izen of the world” wielded his pen. “Party knows no impulse but spirit,” Paine wrote in 1787. “No prize but victory. It is blind to truth, and hardened against conviction.”

History continues to prove Paine right. Parties are, for the most part, as disappointing now as they were in the age of revolution he was ushering in. But movements are different from parties. They carry the banner of principle. The purpose of movements ought not be to make parties but rather to make a politics of principle. Parties that are not extensions of movements are, by their nature, pointless. That pointlessness saps movements of their meaning, and denies them their potential. So movements must either remake old parties or shape new ones, not for the purpose of winning elections but for the purpose of winning the future.

Movements must never be subservient to parties. Perhaps we have evolved enough from Paine’s day that movements can be in synch with parties. They can lead them. But a movement that makes electoral politics its sole purpose will never accomplish anything after Election Day. It will see elections as ends in themselves, not beginnings.

That, above all, is the lesson of the Wisconsin uprising. It began outside the framework of electoral politics and had its greatest successes in that space. When it entered into electoral politics, the movement confronted all the pathologies of a broken system. Against the odds, it achieved victories. But it also suffered defeats. The experience can and should be instructive. The next American left must be in the streets and in the polling places. But it must not accept the narrow confines of the current electoral politics—or of current communications in the mass media. The next American left must make its own way, and play by its own rules, making its own agenda and its own media to communicate that agenda. It must attack structures and practices that erect barriers to democracy. It must have faith that Wisconsin, Occupy and all that has taken place is the beginning of something bigger and better than what has been before. It must, not in any narrow sense but in solidarity with allies across the planet, renew the faith that Paine expressed at the dawn of America’s first revolutionary moment, when he wrote: “We have every opportunity and every encouragement before us, to form the noblest purest constitution on the face of the earth. We have it in our power to begin the world over again.”

## **Related Studies**

### **Occupy Wall Street Turns One: Learning to Stand, Learning to Speak.**

By Ethan Earle, October 2012 (forthcoming)

### **The State of the Unions in the United States**

By Sean Sweeney, October 2012

# GLOBAL NETWORK OF ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG OFFICES



## **NORTH AMERICA AND UNITED NATIONS**

New York City/USA  
Directors: Dr. Stefanie Ehmsen and  
Dr. Albert Scharenberg  
Website: [www.rosalux-nyc.org](http://www.rosalux-nyc.org)

## **MEXICO, CENTRAL AMERICA AND CUBA**

Mexico City/Mexico  
Director: Torge Löding  
Website: [www.rosalux.org.mx](http://www.rosalux.org.mx)

## **ANDEAN REGION**

Quito/Ecuador  
Director: Dr. Miriam Lang  
Website: [www.rosalux.org.ec](http://www.rosalux.org.ec)

## **SOUTH AMERICA**

São Paulo/Brasil  
Director: Kathrin Bühl  
Website: [www.rls.org.br](http://www.rls.org.br)

## **PALESTINE**

Ramallah  
Director: Peter Schäfer  
Website: [www.rosaluxemburg.ps](http://www.rosaluxemburg.ps)

## **ISRAEL**

Tel Aviv  
Director: Dr. Angelika Timm  
Website: [www.rosalux.co.il](http://www.rosalux.co.il)

## **GLOBAL HEADQUARTERS**

Berlin/Germany  
President: Heinz Vietze  
Executive Director: Dr. Florian Weis  
Website: [www.rosalux.de](http://www.rosalux.de)

## **EUROPEAN UNION**

Brussels/Belgium  
Director: Dr. Klaus Sühl  
Website: [www.rosalux-europa.info](http://www.rosalux-europa.info)

## **EAST-CENTRAL EUROPE**

Warsaw/Poland  
Director: Dr. Joanna Gwiazdecka  
Website: [www.rls.pl](http://www.rls.pl)

## **SOUTHEAST EUROPE**

Belgrade/Serbia  
Director: Dr. Boris Kanzleiter  
Website: [www.rosalux.rs](http://www.rosalux.rs)

## **TURKEY**

Istanbul  
Director: Kadriye Karci  
Email: [karci@rosalux.de](mailto:karci@rosalux.de)

## **RUSSIA, CENTRAL ASIA AND CAUCASUS**

Moscow/Russia  
Director: Tiina Fahrni  
Website: [www.rosalux.ru](http://www.rosalux.ru)

## **EAST ASIA**

Beijing/China  
Director: Dr. Lutz Pohle  
Email: [pohle@rosalux.cn](mailto:pohle@rosalux.cn)

## **SOUTHEAST ASIA**

Hanoi/Vietnam  
Director: Nadja Charaby  
Website: [www.rosalux.vn](http://www.rosalux.vn)

## **SOUTH ASIA**

New Delhi/India  
Director: Dr. Carsten Krinn  
Email: [krinn@rosalux.de](mailto:krinn@rosalux.de)

## **WEST AFRICA**

Dakar/Senegal  
Director: Dr. Claus-Dieter König  
Website: [www.rosalux.sn](http://www.rosalux.sn)

## **EAST AFRICA**

Dar Es Salaam/Tanzania  
Director: Siegfried Schröder  
Email: [schroeder@rosalux.de](mailto:schroeder@rosalux.de)

## **SOUTHERN AFRICA**

Johannesburg/South Africa  
Director: Dr. Armin Osmanovic  
Website: [www.rosalux.co.za](http://www.rosalux.co.za)



Website: [www.rosalux-nyc.org](http://www.rosalux-nyc.org)

Facebook: [rosaluxnyc](https://www.facebook.com/rosaluxnyc)

Twitter: [@rosaluxnyc](https://twitter.com/rosaluxnyc)