



# O'NEILL: It's time to get tough with public sector unions

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By [Terry O'Neill - The Tri-City News](#)

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## ***FACE TO FACE: Are public-sector unions the problem in government finances?***

Wisconsin is best known for Milwaukee's beer, Green Bay's Packers and the state's artery-clogging cheese.

But let's not stop there. The state also gained prominence recently after it became a raging battleground between a cost-cutting, union-busting Republican governor, Scott Walker, and a thoroughly enraged unionized civil service, thousands of whose members stormed and occupied the State Capitol.

The great recession of the past two years hit our American cousins right in the chops and, as a consequence, many governments at all levels in the U.S. have been teetering near insolvency. In Wisconsin, the situation was particularly bad, leading Walker to call for laws to limit the power of public-sector unions — power that had led to levels of pay, benefits and locked-in job security unheard of in the private sector.

The public-sector unions had made a fine art of using union dues to fund activities aimed at building pressure to continually ramp up their pay and benefits — benefits that included the state's paying \$55 for every dollar that teachers put into their pension fund. No wonder Walker received a mandate from voters, the majority of whom are not government employees, to take strong action.

Frankly, it has never made sense to me why governments granted civil servants full bargaining and strike rights in the first place. If a service is so important that it has to be performed by government, then it must also be important enough to have its delivery

ensured by law. Moreover, unlike in the private sector, where competition between companies provides a natural check on runaway salaries and benefits, governments have a monopoly-like stranglehold on their market.

After weeks of protests, Walker finally got his way and reforms were passed that removed the ability of unions to bargain collectively over pensions and health care, capped raises to the rate of inflation, ended automatic collection of union dues and required public unions to re-certify every year.

Other states are said to be ready to take similar action. Is Canada next? For an answer, look to the city of Penticton, where the mayor is threatening to turn over operation of the city's new community centre to the private sector unless CUPE workers agree to pay reductions for new employees. It's not a question of fairness but of basic affordability.

Tough times call for tough measures.

*An award-winning journalist, a writer with Edmonton's Report Magazine and Toronto's Catholic Insight magazine, and co-host of RoadkillRadio.com, Face to Face columnist Terry O'Neill is a long-time Coquitlam resident who sits on the board of the Coquitlam Foundation and chairs the finance committee of St. Joseph's Catholic parish.*

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