

Welcome to the Puppet Show!

Take a peek behind the curtain to see who's behind governors' attacks on collective bargaining.

BY AMANDA LITVINOV

Efforts to curb the rights of workers are nothing new, but the antics went from sideshow to center stage in 2010 when deep-pocketed patrons helped radical conservative candidates, like Govs. Snyder (R-Mich.), Scott Walker (R-Wisc.), and John Kasich (R-Ohio)—shown left to right—win elections across the country. After winning, the governors signed anti-worker laws as part of a well-coordinated attempt to undermine collective bargaining—giving the same old song and dance about how their actions would balance budgets. In reality, they harmed the middle class and drove down wages. They sold school reform snake oil with one hand while using the other to weaken or eliminate educators' ability to speak for their students. But they didn't act alone. Let's see who's really pulling the strings.

Misinformed voters,

exhausted by decades of anti-worker vitriol, have been duped into believing that public unions are to blame for state budget crises and lagging student performance. The real story: The forces behind the curtain have more access to our lawmakers today than ever before, but the collective voice of workers is one of their most powerful checks and balances.

Conservative Think Tanks

What the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) does at the national level, affiliates of the State Policy Network do locally—both aggressively peddle policy recommendations that denigrate unions and pound the anti-taxes drum. These conservative “think tanks” see public schools as perhaps the last untapped frontier of corporate opportunity, so it's in their interest to reduce local control of schools and go after educator unions. Much of the work is done by courting GOP lawmakers and “advising” new governors. It costs money to have all those private meetings with policymakers nationwide—not to mention the expense of fueling the right-wing media machine.

Deep-Pocketed Funders

Oh, how the money to assault workers' rights has flowed! ALEC's allies include the billionaire Koch brothers who are well-known for funding think tanks and foundations that push radical right-wing policies. Thanks to the 2010 Citizens United decision—which made it okay for corporations to spend unlimited funds on advertisements to support or oppose candidates for federal office, as long as those ads are created independent of the campaigns they support—these groups can pump more money into the campaigns of favored candidates. Just look at Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker. By last summer, his biggest donors were out-of-state billionaires bent on making sure he survived recall elections brought by outraged citizens. Don't believe it? Diane Hendricks, Walker's top donor, made her intentions clear. A camera caught her telling Walker to make Wisconsin a red state and "work on these unions."

CEOs on Corporate Welfare

Hands off my loopholes! That's this group's battle cry. Rather than pay their fare share, they'd like to see public school children crammed into overcrowded classrooms and make educators go years without a salary increase. Ohio Gov. John Kasich's performance is keeping the corporate crowd's handouts intact, and allowing education funding to fall lower than it was when Kasich took office. Kasich has also diverted scarce education dollars to voucher programs and failing charters.

Likeminded Legislators

Overreaching governors need these folks to help push the false choice between protecting workers' rights and attracting new business. Some state legislators are also looking for a scapegoat to cover up past sins with the budget. (Organized public service workers come in handy for that.) Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder's 2011 budget proposed a \$2 billion tax cut for business, while jacking up income tax rates for low-income families by another 1.1 percent. Snyder and Co. have since rammed through a so-called "right-to-work" law without one public hearing, though most of the state's voters opposed it.

Well-informed activists

who care about workers' rights, public education, and the middle class hold their elected leaders accountable, while looking forward to 2014, when they will have the chance to speak out with their voice and their vote against these extremist governors and their supporting casts. Become one of them. Sign up for a weekly activist newsletter at EducationVotes.org!



ILLUSTRATION: JIM STARR