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THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

WSJ.com

OPINION | MARCH 10, 2011

Why I'm Fighting in Wisconsin

We can avoid mass teacher layoffs and reward our best performers. But we have to act now.

By SCOTT WALKER

In 2010, Megan Sampson was named an Outstanding First Year Teacher in Wisconsin. A week later, she got a layoff notice from the Milwaukee Public Schools. Why would one of the best new teachers in the state be one of the first let go? Because her collective-bargaining contract requires staffing decisions to be made based on seniority.

Ms. Sampson got a layoff notice because the union leadership would not accept reasonable changes to their contract. Instead, they hid behind a collective-bargaining agreement that costs the taxpayers \$101,091 per year for each teacher, protects a 0% contribution for health-insurance premiums, and forces schools to hire and fire based on seniority and union rules.

My state's budget-repair bill, which passed the Assembly on Feb. 25 and awaits a vote in the Senate, reforms this union-controlled hiring and firing process by allowing school districts to assign staff based on merit and performance. That keeps great teachers like Ms. Sampson in the classroom.

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Most states in the country are facing a major budget deficit. Many are cutting billions of dollars of aid to schools and local governments. These cuts lead to massive layoffs or increases in property taxes—*or both*.

In Wisconsin, we have a better approach to tackling our \$3.6 billion deficit. We are reforming the way government works, as well as balancing our budget. Our reform plan gives state and local governments the tools to balance the budget through reasonable benefit contributions. In total, our budget-repair bill saves local governments almost \$1.5 billion, outweighing the reductions in state aid in our budget.



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While it might be a bold political move, the changes are modest. We ask government workers to make a 5.8% contribution to their pensions and a 12.6% contribution to their health-insurance premium, both of which are well below what other workers pay for benefits. Our plan calls for Wisconsin state workers to contribute half of what federal employees pay for their health-insurance premiums. (It's also worth noting that most federal workers don't have collective bargaining for wages and benefits.)

For example, my brother works as a banquet manager at a hotel and occasionally works as a bartender. My sister-in-law works at a department store. They have two beautiful kids. They are a typical middle-class Wisconsin family. At the start of this debate, David reminded me that he pays nearly \$800 per month for his family's health-insurance premium and a modest 401(k) contribution. He said most workers in Wisconsin would love a deal like the one we are proposing.

The unions say they are ready to accept concessions, yet their actions speak louder than words. Over the past three

weeks, local unions across the state have pursued contracts without new pension or health-insurance contributions. Their rhetoric does not match their record on this issue.

Local governments can't pass budgets on a hope and a prayer. Beyond balancing budgets, our reforms give schools—as well as state and local governments—the tools to reward productive workers and improve their operations. Most crucially, our reforms confront the barriers of collective bargaining that currently block innovation and reform.

When Gov. Mitch Daniels repealed collective bargaining in Indiana six years ago, it helped government become more efficient and responsive. The average pay for Indiana state employees has actually increased, and high-performing employees are rewarded with pay increases or bonuses when they do something exceptional.

Passing our budget-repair bill will help put similar reforms into place in Wisconsin. This will be good for the Badger State's hard-working taxpayers. It will also be good for state and local government employees who overwhelmingly want to do their jobs well.

In Wisconsin, we can avoid the massive teacher layoffs that schools are facing across America. Our budget-repair bill is a commitment to the future so our children won't face even more dire consequences than we face today, and teachers like Ms. Sampson are rewarded—not laid off.

Taking on the status quo is no easy task. Each day, there are protesters in and around our state Capitol. They have every right to be heard. But their voices cannot drown out the voices of the countless taxpayers who want us to balance our budgets and, more importantly, to make government work for each of them.

Mr. Walker, a Republican, is the governor of Wisconsin.

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