

# ACCESS

TO ENGLISH: *Social Studies*  
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ACCESS UPDATE: REVOLT IN WISCONSIN



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The following article takes up a fierce political conflict between conservative Republicans and liberal Democrats in one of the 50 states that make up the United States. It provides a good illustration of the political divisions between the right and left in America today. It also shows the importance of state politics in the United States. This importance is often lost on people outside the country, who tend to think of Washington as the center of all power. No so. Most government in America is found on the state level. And some of the most bitter conflicts, too.



#### **WISCONSIN:**

Population: 5,686,986  
(Norway: 4,691,849)

Size: 145,436 sq km  
(Norway: 323,802 sq km)

### **PRE-READING ACTIVITY**

Before you read this article, consider the following questions:

- How far would you go to protest something you disagreed with; that is, what actions would you be willing to take?
- What do you think of unions?
- Who should have the power to decide how public taxes are used?
- How much power should the majority have in a democracy?



# Revolt in Wisconsin

By Robert Mikkelsen

Article published March 9, 2011

On February 17, 2011, fourteen State Senators from Wisconsin fled the state capital, Madison, and [hightailed](#) it to the neighboring state of Illinois, where they went into hiding. Why were State Senators fleeing their own state? What were they hiding from?

To answer that, we have to roll back the calendar a few months.

## Republicans on the rise

In November 2010 the Republican Party enjoyed a great victory in the American mid-term elections, gaining a majority in the House of Representatives in Washington.

See *Access Update: "The Perfect Slosh"*.

This victory reflected great dissatisfaction with the Democratic Party, led by Barack Obama, because it had failed to end the severe economic downturn (or [recession](#)) that had started in 2007.

This same dissatisfaction also led to many victories for the Republicans on the state level of government. In Wisconsin they won a majority of 60 of 99 seats in the State Assembly and of 19 of 33 seats in the State Senate. They also elected a new, conservative Republican Governor, Scott Walker. This victory meant that the Republicans had gained control of both legislative and executive power in the state.

See *Access to English: Social Studies, "Separation of Powers"*, p. 181.

Governor Walker decided to make use of this power in a radically new way, sparking off a statewide uprising and a nationwide debate.

### **Budget crunch**

The issue that triggered his action was a budget crunch caused by the same recession that had fueled the Republican victory in the first place. All across the nation, states faced great difficulty finding money to pay for their normal expenses. A failing economy meant reduced tax income. It also meant increased unemployment payments and other welfare costs. In Wisconsin it was estimated that the budget shortfall (or *deficit*) would be \$137 million by June, 2011 and \$3.6 *billion* by 2013. Clearly painful cuts would have to be made, but by who and how?

### **Dropping the bomb**

That was when Governor Walker dropped “the bomb,” as he himself put it. As part of his [legislation](#) to meet the budget crisis, he proposed that the Wisconsin [legislature](#) end the right of state employees to *collective bargaining* – that is, to have independent unions. State employees’ unions would no longer be able to strike or to negotiate anything except wages, which would also be limited by state law. In one swipe, Walker proposed removing the results of 50 years of agreements between Wisconsin and more than 250,000 of its employees, including many thousands of teachers.

He claimed he was doing this in order to gain control over public expenses, many of which were tied to union agreements. His opponents accused him of using the budget crisis as a political weapon to destroy the Republicans’ old enemies – labor unions that were strong supporters of the Democratic Party.

### **An explosion of protests**

The reaction of state employees in Wisconsin and of organized labor in America was swift and furious. The following weekend more than 50,000 protesters crowded around the Capitol Building in the center of Madison, carrying banners and chanting slogans opposing Walker's legislation. Some entered the building itself and began a sleep-in. In the weeks that followed protests continued. By the weekend of March 5-6, 2011 their number has increased to 70,000. Meantime the Republicans called in their supporters, busing in conservative Tea Party activists from around the state to stage counter-protests in support of Governor Walker.



Protests around the Wisconsin Capitol Building in Madison

### **A national question**

It quickly became clear that this was more than just a local issue in Wisconsin. Throughout the United States public employees were [locking horns](#) with state governments which wished to cut back on employee rights and benefits in order to reduce expenses and balance budgets. Anti-Walker protesters in Wisconsin got

support from America's largest union organization, The American Federation of Labor – Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL – CIO), which sent money and organizers. Democratic President Barack Obama condemned Walker's proposal as an "assault on unions." He ordered his own political organization, Organizing for America, to mobilize support for the protesters.

### **Democracy – American style**

Meanwhile, back in Illinois, the fourteen State Senators remained hidden. And here is why. According to the Constitution of the State of Wisconsin, in order for a bill to be passed in the State Senate, a minimum number of the Senators (known as a *quorum*) have to be present. Today that number is **20** of 33. But the Republicans have majority of only **19**. As long as the remaining **14** Democratic Senators do not show up in the State Senate, no vote can be taken on Governor Walker's proposed legislation, so it cannot be passed. As they say in chess – check!

Of course, there is some disagreement in Wisconsin about whether Governor Walker can have the fourteen absent State Senators arrested and brought by force to the State Senate. But even if he could, it wouldn't help him. He cannot order anyone arrested in Illinois. He has no authority there. American states are *real* states, each with their own police force.

See *Access to English: Social Studies, "State government"*, p. 188.

### **Continuing conflict**

At the moment this article is being written, no solution to the situation has been found. On the one hand, the Democrats, the state employees and their supporters continue to protest. They accuse Governor Walker of acting like a dictator. On the other hand, Governor Walker continues to insist that his budget bill be passed

without change. He accuses the 14 missing Democratic State Senators of undermining democracy by refusing to follow the law. Neither side shows any signs of giving in.

### **An American tradition**

Perhaps this all sounds a bit strange in a 21<sup>st</sup> century democracy, but it has deep roots in the rough-and-tumble world of American state politics. Once, way back in 1840, the Democratic Party of Illinois proposed an early end to a session of the state legislature in order to stop a bill from being passed. Their opponents, the Whigs, found out about it and tried to leave the Capitol Building so there would be no quorum for the vote. But the Democrats had already locked all the doors. Then one enterprising young Whig headed for the second floor and escaped by jumping out through an open window to the ground below! His name was Abraham Lincoln.

## **ACTIVITIES**

### **1 Discussion**

With a partner, go back to the questions you considered before reading this article. Explain your opinions to your partner. Have any of your opinions changed? If so, which?

### **2 Comprehension:**

Answer the following questions:

- a) Where are the fourteen State Senators hiding out?
- b) Why did the Republicans win a victory in the American mid-term elections?
- c) How successful were the Republicans in Wisconsin?
- d) Why was it necessary to make painful cuts in the state budget?

- e) Why did Governor Walker wish to end collective bargaining for public employees?
- f) How did public employees react to his proposal?
- g) Who has supported the protesters in Wisconsin?
- h) Why did the fourteen State Senators flee the state?

### 3 Discussion

- a) Do you think the fourteen State Senators should return to Wisconsin?
- b) Is the right of workers to organize in a union a “human right” like freedom of speech or freedom of religion?
- c) Why is one of the demonstrators holding up a sign saying “AND THEN THEY CAME FOR THE UNIONISTS”? What is she referring to?



- d) What do you think would happen if the Norwegian state proposed that public employees could no longer have unions?
- e) Does the uprising in Wisconsin have anything in common with the recent uprising in Egypt (as the man in the picture below seems to think)?





#### 4 Research

Use a search engine or some of the links in our [links collection](#) to find updated information about the revolt in Wisconsin. Write a short report on one or both of these questions:

- a) Has the conflict between the Governor Walker and his opponents been resolved? How do matters stand today?
- b) Are there similar conflicts between public employees and state governments in other states in America? Report on one.

KEY:

**2 Comprehension**

a) Where are the fourteen State Senators hiding out?

Illinois

b) Why did the Republicans win a victory in the American mid-term elections?

Because of the economic recession.

c) How successful were the Republicans in Wisconsin?

They won both legislative and executive power.

d) Why was it necessary to make painful cuts in the state budget?

The recession has led to a fall in money from taxes to pay for state expenses.

e) Why did Governor Scott wish to end collective bargaining for public employees?

He claims it is to control public expenses. His opponents claim he wants to destroy unions which support the Democratic Party.

f) How did public employees react to his proposal?

They have staged mass protests against it.

g) Who has supported the protesters in Wisconsin?

The AFL-CIO, President Barack Obama – and at least one Egyptian.

h) Why did the fourteen State Senators flee the state?

To make sure no vote could be taken on Governor Walker's proposed legislation.