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Wisconsin has uncomfortable parallels with the Mideast

Joan Chittister | Mar. 9, 2011 From Where I Stand

I've been muddling over this particular column for days now. And I have reasons:

First, I myself come from a union family and I know the pull of bias when I see it. Especially my own.

The first demonstration I ever attended I was huddled in my father's arms as strangers rushed by the front of our house. Late one night, I could hear the union men come roaring down the street, the men yelling, the torches burning, parked cars being rocked and rolled onto the sidewalks.

It was shortly after the close of WWII. Wages were still frozen despite the fact that prices were rising and there were finally consumer goods coming off the assembly lines that workers did not have enough money to buy.

Everyone had benefitted from the war except the laborers who had been its engine. Until now. Until those brave men banded together and refused to allow government and corporate intimidation, physical force, fear or isolation to suppress them.

Without unions, my father taught me, workers would have no one to represent their interests in the country. They would have no public voice, no chance to make labor's concerns known to industry, no way to demand a hearing at all, no way to protect the interests of the working class.

Those arguments had a lasting effect on me.

Second, at the same time, my father, a union man, was also quick to condemn unions for over-reaching. He shook his head sadly and pronounced presciently -- years before unions managed to outfox themselves by demands that drove industries to relocate to Third World labor pools -- that unions themselves were fast becoming unions? worst enemies.

I was affected by those arguments, too.

The long-term impact of those discussions, as well as 100 years of Catholic Social Teaching, is that I am comfortable listening to both sides of a union debate, wanting the unions to be just in seeking justice but aware, at the same time, that unions themselves can damage their own cause.

But then, third, something else entered the picture to give me pause about the tug-of-war going on in Wisconsin over the role and power of unions, either public or private, in a period of massive corporate power and profit. What I saw happening across the Arab world made me look again, and differently, at the attempt being made to render unions powerless here.

It suddenly occurred to me that the uprisings in the Middle East and the uprising in Wisconsin were not two distinct situations. They were, in fact, derived from the very same problem and they are both leading in the same direction.

By the time the public squares of the Arab world filled up in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, Iran, Iraq and Libya, one thing had become painfully clear: After years -- decades, in some cases -- of suppression, it was no longer possible to smother the cries of the people.

After all, what else is there to lose once you find yourself at the mercy of a dictator, your ideas rejected, your needs ignored, your development stifled, your hopes dashed and dashed and dashed again? Why not revolt? Why care about losing your life to the dictator's guns now that you have already lost it to his insane sense of autocracy?

What really bothered me was that one group of people was rising up in countries we call dictatorships. The other group of people was rising up in what we call a democracy. Our democracy.

And the Arabs were gaining more ground against dictators than the unions seemed to be gaining in a democracy that had won their rights for them years ago. How can that be?

The two scenes -- the Middle East and Wisconsin -- have one thing in common. In both cases, each of the governments in question simply refuse to talk. They decline to negotiate. They rebuff attempts to compromise. They reject the need to listen. The answer they say is "No."

That is power talking, not justice, not democracy, not reason, not care.

And worse, at least in Wisconsin, there are clear attempts at subterfuge. In Wisconsin, the attempt is to camouflage one goal by calling it something else. To achieve one thing by naming it another.

The problem is the economy, Governor Walker insists in Wisconsin. But the truth is -- and the governor knows it -- that the economic concessions have already been accepted by the unions. What the unions do not accept is the effect of the law to completely repeal their bargaining rights, the union's very reason for existence.

There is no doubt that the economic situation around the globe and here, as well, is a complex one. There is no doubt that having been duped by the coalition of institutionalized greed and conscienceless financiers, the population at large will pay the ultimate price for that kind of downright skullduggery and, in many cases, blatant dishonesty.

There is no doubt that we must all do something to restore economic sanity to a country where the cost of things long ago ceased to reflect their real value. But the union in Wisconsin did that at the very beginning of the tension by accepting wage cuts and a new pension schedule.

So, economics is not the real intent of the attempt in Wisconsin to turn unions into coffee klatsches.

In fact, a piece of legislation like this can have one purpose and one purpose only: It is meant to turn a democracy into an autocracy, a plutocracy, a civil monarchy where the one last act of a union member is to throw roses before the feet of governors intent on destroying them.

Teachers and firefighters and policemen and sanitation workers need the right to negotiate lots of things in addition to wages and pensions. They need to be able to negotiate work hours and work load, promotion procedures and professional materials, working conditions and benefits, vacations and medical leave, work standards and workers' rights.

Take those things away from the laborer and you no longer have workers, you have serfs.

Is there anybody who really believes that such oppression will really bring us economic security? Or that such

raw use of raw power can really make America great again?

From where I stand, if we can believe what we see on television and read on Twitter, this is not a national issue, this is a human issue.

If something isn't done in all institutions -- in both state and church, church and state -- to include people in the discussion of the questions that affect them, in the real resolution of the issues that touch their own lives, the problem won't be national unrest, it will be global unrest and this time there will be no institution large enough either to suppress it or to survive it. Then what?

I'd like to ask my dad what he thinks about that one.

[Benedictine Sr. Joan Chittister is a longtime contributor to *NCR*. Her Web column, *From Where I Stand*, is found on the *NCR* Web site: NCRonline.org/blogs/from-where-i-stand [1].]

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