

The News from Wisconsin

By Mel Lavine

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Many watched Tuesday (a) to see whether labor was able to muster enough support to recall a governor in Wisconsin who cut collective bargaining rights for most of the state's public workers and (b) as a sign of how the presidential race will turn out in the fall. President Obama easily won this so-called Midwestern battleground in 2008 – but Republicans bounced back in the 2010 midterm elections.

Although Obama made known his support for Tom Barrett, the Democratic mayor of Milwaukee, who opposed Governor Scott Walker in the recall election, he kept his distance. He did not make an appearance when union members and their supporters demonstrated for days at the state capitol, to the disappointment of some Democrats. Nor did he dispatch top figures in the administration to represent him.

Wisconsin signaled a problem for Obama. In a piece just before the election, The New York Times pointed out that Wisconsin voted for Democrats in every presidential election since 1988, “but the margins have sometimes been remarkably slim, and the recall election has led independents and Republicans who voted for Mr. Obama four years ago to take sides.” He needs their votes in November and may not have wanted “to alienate them by stepping conspicuously into the fight,” the paper said.

But prominent out-state Democrats came into the state and campaigned for the Milwaukee mayor, most recently former president Bill Clinton on Friday. A former U.S. senator from Wisconsin, Russ Feingold who was defeated two years ago in the resurgent Republican sweep, characterized the election as a referendum as well “for the rights of workers across this country and frankly for the Democratic party, for President Obama – they all have a stake in this.”

As unions have dwindled in size, so has the income gap widened between the 1% and rest of the country. In the 1950s nearly 40 percent of workers were covered by union contracts. In the past 40 or more years advances in technology, globalization and off-shoring have contributed to the decline and fall of labor unions.

Ronald Reagan did his part in 1981 when he fired the striking air controllers. That sent a message to business that the government had changed the rules – government no longer protected unions – for industry it was open season, which, it has been, ever since, as Joe Nocera wrote in his Times column on Monday.

Today unions represent 12 percent of the work force.

Now that Walker won the Battle for Wisconsin, we can wonder if president Obama now regrets his decision to stay away? We wonder, too, if he'll ever cite Ronald Reagan as a role model as he has in the past.

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