



Wisconsin Unions Threaten Businesses

In a letter obtained by *The New American* sent to companies in Wisconsin, a coalition of government-employee unions inform businesses that if they do not publicly oppose Republican efforts, they will be boycotted. If they join the battle on behalf of union bosses, however, good things will happen.

"The undersigned [coalition of government unions] would like your company to publicly oppose Governor Walker's efforts to virtually eliminate collective bargaining for public employees in Wisconsin," reads one of the letters obtained by *The New American*. If the company doesn't respond within a week, the letter informs the recipient that unions "will assume" the firm stands with Gov. Walker.



"In the event that you cannot support this effort to save collective bargaining, please be advised that the undersigned will publicly and formally boycott the goods and services provided by your company," the document continues. But if the firm gives in and joins, the unions promise to "publicly celebrate" the partnership.

On top of that, the union bosses also demanded that the companies disclose their contributions to political organizations. "We ... believe the public has a right to know what kind of contributions or payments you make that impact the political process," the letter states. It is signed by the heads of various unions including state police and firefighter unions, among others. Apparently the effort has already [proven](#) fruitful, too.

Another letter, [cited](#) in a *Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel* report, was circulated by the Wisconsin State Employees Union, part of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), which in turn is part of the AFL-CIO. That document, too, threatens boycotts of businesses that do not bow to union demands.

First, the letter urges the targeted company to display a pro-government-union sign in its window. According to the threat, companies receiving the letter had already turned down the sign at least once before. "Failure to do so will leave us no choice but [to] do a public boycott of your business," the letter states. "And sorry, neutral means 'no' to those who work for the largest employer in the area and are union members."

Some of the unions' targets were outraged by the threats and said the effort would backfire. Jim Haney, for example, the outgoing chief of the pro-reform group Wisconsin Manufacturers and Commerce — one of the organizations specifically mentioned in the threatening letters from unions — called the campaign appalling.

"It's kind of like the old protection racket," Haney [told](#) the *Journal-Sentinel*. "If you have the right



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sticker, we won't break your knees.' This is beyond the pale to force a small-business person to choose when they want to stay neutral. But that isn't good enough."

And some of the businesses that received the threatening letters did indeed stand up for themselves. Dawn Bobo, the owner of a recently opened Village Dollar store, for example, [put up](#) a different sign instead: "We Support Union Grove — Not Bully Tactics," it read. Other business owners [cited](#) in an article by Wisconsin's *The Journal Times* newspaper were clearly upset with the bullying, too.

And after news of the threats spread, the issue attracted a barrage of negative publicity, even at the national level. A *Wall Street Journal* piece, for instance, was very blunt in its disdain for what it called "union thuggery" on April 1.

"Having lost their fight in the legislature, Wisconsin unions are now getting out the steel pipes for those who don't step lively to their cause," the paper [said](#) in its editorial. "This kind of union thuggery is all too common and is in keeping with the larger political goal of preventing union members from exercising their own rights of free association.... This is the nasty modern reality of government union power."

Even more serious than the media backlash is the fact that some [commentators](#) are now [speculating](#) that the tactics could in fact border on criminal intimidation. Analysts have cited several state laws that, depending on one's interpretation, could mean the boycott threats are actually potential felonies.

One of the laws cited by several pundits and columnists [reads](#): "Whoever, either verbally or by any written or printed communication, maliciously threatens ... or commits any injury to the person, property, business, profession, calling or trade, or the profits and income of any business, profession, calling or trade of another, with ... intent to compel the person so threatened to do any act against the person's will ... is guilty of a Class H felony."

[Another criminal law](#) would seem to apply as well, according to [analysts](#): "Any 2 or more persons who shall combine, associate, agree, mutually undertake or concert together for the purpose of willfully or maliciously injuring another in his or her reputation, trade, business or profession by any means whatever, or for the purpose of maliciously compelling another to do or perform any act against his or her will, or preventing or hindering another from doing or performing any lawful act shall be punished by imprisonment in the county jail not more than one year or by fine not exceeding \$500."

In addition to the pundits, some legislators are [getting involved](#) on the legal front too. Republican state Senator Van Wanggaard, a former police officer, sent a letter to the Attorney General urging him to investigate the threats. He said the Sheriff in his county was getting involved as well.

"We're kind of looking into that now because there have been numerous complaints that have come into our office with this type of, I would call it thuggery where you're trying to intimidate people," he [told](#) the Wisconsin-based MacIver News Service, comparing the tactics to a protection racket. "I've got people that are just really scared that these people are going to come back and do something to their business ... if they don't bend."

Of course, it isn't the first time public-sector union bosses in Wisconsin have been caught plotting potentially illegal activities in their efforts to stop the law. In early March, a coalition of unions, socialists, and other agitators were [advocating and planning an illegal general strike](#). So far, that has not materialized.

But a [list of hundreds of businesses targeted by the unions](#), along with the companies' positions on the



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campaign, can still be found online. The document uses color codes to identify which businesses caved in to the demands and placed a sign in their window, which companies decided to “remain neutral,” and which firms have not yet responded.

Dueling campaigns on Facebook — one side encouraging members to buy from targeted businesses in a “[buycott](#),” the other urging its supporters to boycott them — have [garnered](#) varying degrees of support. It appears, however, that the pro-boycott groups have a larger support base on the social-networking service.

But following the backlash against the tactics and the publicity given to the criminal statutes possibly dealing with those methods, at least one of the government-sector unions helping to organize the boycotts [backed out](#) of the campaign. “There was some unfortunate overzealousness in the field,” said an April 1 email [quoted](#) by the *Wisconsin State Journal* from executive director of AFSCME Council 24 Marty Beil. “We have made clear all along that we see small business as a partner and ally in getting Wisconsin back to work.”

The [budget-repair bill](#) is currently in limbo after a county judge, whose son [has been](#) a political operative for major unions, [issued a temporary restraining order](#) against its implementation. An appeals court [ruled](#) on March 24 that the state Supreme Court should take up the matter.

After initially [announcing](#) that the law was in force, Gov. Walker’s administration has since said that it would stop implementing the bill until the issues are resolved in court. When that may happen is still uncertain.

The legislation, which drew [weeks of fierce protests](#), aims to close a [multi-billion dollar budget deficit](#) by requiring most government employees to contribute slightly more to their generous pensions and health benefits. It [would](#) also make payment of union dues optional while limiting the collective-bargaining privileges of most public-sector workers.

Photo of union supporter raising his clenched fist at the state capitol in Madison, Wisconsin: AP Images

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