

DIVIDED WE FALL

IDEAS FOR CLASSROOM DISCUSSIONS

- 1) Near the beginning of the film, labor organizer Charity Schmidt describes hearing the news of the budget repair bill while in a meeting of the *Labor and Working Class Studies Project* – a coalition of labor, community and campus groups (sadly, now defunct). That meeting, she says, became a meeting to develop a plan for demanding a public hearing on the bill which was ultimately successful. Throughout the film, scholar-activists are heavily involved in helping to organize and sustain the protests.

How can unions foster deep ties with scholar-activists and other public intellectuals to make the best use of the skills and knowledge of both groups?

- 2) At one point during the capitol occupation, disability activist Barb Vedder tells the protesters, “This bill is about a lot more than workers and workers’ rights!” The political program to dismantle unions is part of a larger austerity agenda in Wisconsin and elsewhere. In Chicago, efforts of the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) to support community groups resisting school closures there resulted in community support for the Chicago Teachers’ Union’s successful strike action in 2012.

How can unions foster ties with other grassroots activist groups to their mutual benefit?

- 3) The norms of the Capitol occupation were clearly influenced by what is now often called “horizontalism;” that is, political organizing based on direct democracy, mutual aid, and eschewing a leader who negotiates or acts on behalf of the group. It’s a model that the Occupy movement later that year also employed. But it was baffling to the State union leaders.

Is it possible to organize across differing political orientations, models for leadership, and decision-making processes? What are the challenges and how might they be overcome?

- 4) In the film, Frank Emspak, Executive Producer of *Workers Independent News*, points out that the focus of the state unions on electing and lobbying legislators left very little role for rank-and-file members to play. And so, Emspak notes, when a crisis occurred, nobody knew what to do. This seems to point up the weakness of “service” unions as opposed to “organizing” unions.

How might the contemporary union movement better prepare rank-and-file members and all organizational levels for successful direct action?

- 5) The teachers’ “sickouts” clearly fueled the growth of the protests and inspired activists around the state. Yet they seem to have been shut down prematurely by higher-ups hoping to make a deal with the ruthless new administration. It’s worth noting that in West Virginia, where strikes are illegal, teachers recently staged the longest strike in that state’s history. When their union leadership announced a deal with the governor, the rank-and-file refused to return to work. Ultimately, they won raises for both themselves and other public sector workers despite Republican control of their state government.

How can unions more effectively take into account and support the wishes of their members and make the most of wildcat actions when they erupt?

April 7, 2018

Dear Labor Educators:

Thank-you for attending this screening of clips from my film Divided We Fall. I really wish I could be there, but the date conflicts with an earlier commitment. I am interested to hear your comments, reflections, questions, etc. Please feel free to email me at kacosta@twelfthhousefilms.com if you have something you'd like to share or if you wish to initiate a dialogue.

The 2011 Wisconsin Uprising, to paraphrase the words of Matt Rothschild, was the most profound political experience of my life. To see masses of people roused to sustained action, working together in good faith for the betterment of the larger society, generating such positive energy and camaraderie, was deeply moving – and went a long way towards restoring my faith in humanity.

So you can imagine how painful the loss was, not just for me, but for many Wisconsinites. To this day, years later, it never fails that after a screening someone approaches me, choked up with emotion, to tell me how they've avoided watching the film, even though they knew of other screenings, because can hardly bear relive the events.

I believe that many people, in this country and around the world, are yearning for an opportunity to create a better way of living, to push back against a corporate agenda that threatens to make wage slaves of us all, to poison our environment, to control every aspect of our lives for their private profit. When the moment arrives again that people are ready to act, leaders must be ready. Unions are a key institution for pushing back against corporate oppression. As the old song says, "Without our brain and muscle, not a single wheel can turn."

It is in this spirit that I offer this film, an admittedly critical perspective on the set of events that came to be known as the 2011 Wisconsin Uprising. A relative of mine who is an engineer says that often more can be learned from mistakes than when things work out as planned. In his forthcoming review in New Labor Forum, David Nack writes:

As we enter a period of widespread politicization on the Left many, particularly young people, are finding their way into the labor movement for the first time... With such energy, it may be possible to escape the defensive crouch of the labor movement. Losing, as happened in Wisconsin, may yet help to create a new generation of hardened veteran activists. Sometimes the experience of defeat can teach how to win victories.

My hope is that this film, in some small way, will contribute to lessons learned for future victories.

Solidarity!

*Katherine M Acosta
Director and Producer, Divided We Fall*

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