



Laboratory of Resistance

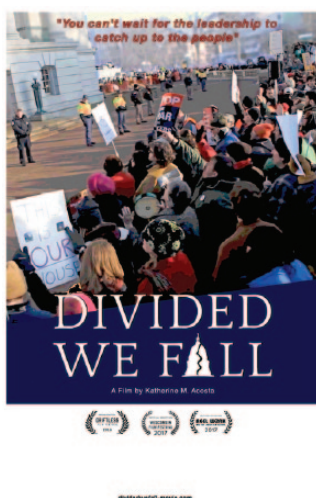
“Divided We Fall”

By Katherine Acosta

Twelfth House Films, 2016

Reviewed by: David Nack

DOI: 10.1177/1095796018765151



It is remarkable how quickly the Wisconsin Uprising of 2011 has receded from view. Arguably the most significant labor movement mass action in decades—certainly rivaled in recent years only by teacher strikes in Chicago in 2012, and West Virginia this year—its ultimate defeat has, perhaps, led many to push it out of mind too quickly. But any mobilization on this scale, even one that failed in most visible ways, leaves traces. What happened in Wisconsin in the spring of 2011, some thought, contributed to the Occupy Wall Street movement that fall. In any case, its place in our memory and our understanding of its strengths and weaknesses all deserve to be more salient.

For that reason, Katherine Acosta’s documentary film “Divided We Fall” is welcome. The Wisconsin Uprising was a mass protest led by teaching assistants, students, teachers,

public workers, and others in response to the newly elected Governor Scott Walker’s proposals to shift health insurance and pension costs to Wisconsin public workers, and to severely restrict public sector bargaining in the state. This is not the first such film to cover this history; notably Sam Mayfield’s “Wisconsin Rising” (2014) also depicts the massive mobilization against Governor Scott Walker’s and the Republican legislature’s surprise assault, but Mayfield’s film covers a considerably greater period, documenting the recall votes of Walker and legislators in 2012, and raising serious questions about that failed effort and strategy. By contrast, “Divided We Fall” closely follows events in the early days of the Wisconsin Uprising, beginning shortly before Valentine’s Day in 2011 and spanning the next several weeks, up until the round-the-clock physical occupation of the State Capitol ended. The subsequent mass protests lasted far longer; the film’s implication is that by the end of that early period, patterns within the protest movement were firmly established.

Acosta, who holds a PhD in sociology, provides a critical view of the role of the state’s labor organizations and their leaders and their engagement with the leaders and rank-and-file protestors and occupiers in and around the Capitol building. The roles of two union locals in the Madison area are explored: the Teaching Assistants Association at the University of Wisconsin (UW), Madison, and Madison Teachers Inc. (MTI), representing teachers and staff in Madison-area public schools. Both mobilized members and allies en masse to the capital to protest proposed state funding cuts and the gutting of public sector collective bargaining. Initially this resulted in the occupation of the Capitol building and a de facto job action closing Madison and other schools, as many teachers and staff converged on the Capitol.

Instructively, “Divided We Fall” depicts a growing division between occupiers, protestors

in the streets, and local union members and leaders on one hand, and state labor leaders on the other. State and national labor leaders frequently met among themselves one block from the Capitol, generally apart from either protesters or local labor leaders. Although the geographical distance between the two was close, the psychic and social distance loomed large. The film portrays labor leaders as thinking hierarchically, while the protestors practiced a kind of root-and-branch democracy in decision making, based on building consensus.

Very near to the start of the protests Wisconsin leaders of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the Wisconsin Education Association Council (WEAC), an affiliate of the National Educational Association (NEA), and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) publicly conceded to cost-shifting of benefit costs that Walker and the Republicans demanded of their members. The leadership of the American Federation of Teachers in Wisconsin subsequently agreed to these demands as well. This was done in the desperate hope of persuading these politicians to drop their planned evisceration of public sector bargaining. Nothing of the sort took place. The film shows that certain Wisconsin state labor and Democratic Party leaders also attempted to influence occupiers to leave the Capitol building, and in general worked to end the mass protests sooner rather than later. Their actions may have diverted energy away from expanding protest efforts. Why did they do this? The late Marty Beil, the longtime Executive Director of AFSCME District Council 24 explains in the film his concern that the protests were risking getting out of hand, implying that violence might be in the offing. One may presume that very few protesters at the time would have agreed with this assessment. Police and firefighters, along with the Madison Firefighters Bagpipers Brigade joined the ranks of protestors regularly outside the Capitol, lending an air of lawful and constitutional seeking of the redress of grievances. Other protestors indicated their belief that the protests would remain nonviolent, bringing even their small children and pets to attend various protest events. No arrests were made in the initial occupation of the Capitol.

One of the great strengths of the film is that key participants provide their various and contrasting points of view about events as they rapidly unfold on screen. We see the mainly youthful occupiers in the Capitol, along with Teaching Assistants Association-Graduate Worker Union of UW-Madison activists and others spontaneously divide logistical tasks, operating on a consensus basis. They commandeer a legislative hearing room for ongoing strategizing and coordination functions. National and state labor leaders occasionally joined their discussions, but more often met mainly among themselves. To improve coordination between the occupiers and labor leaders some occupy leaders were delegated as liaisons to the union leadership group. These young people soon found themselves under pressure, as one exasperated national union representative put it to: "control your people." Clearly the distance between these two groups remained considerable, and grew ever greater as labor and Democratic Party leaders alike moved toward winding down the occupation of the Capitol, and channeling the protests into recall elections.

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"Divided We Fall" does not argue that labor leaders acted totally as a monolithic bloc. For example, John Matthews, the then longtime Executive Director of MTI, a local of WEAC, is also included in the film. When Matthews learned that Mary Bell, President of WEAC, announced that all teachers would be returning to work on Monday, February 21, he was clearly chagrined. In his mind, this was compounding the error of the offer state labor leaders made to concede to the governor's economic demands for cost-shifting. "Selling out pulled the rug out from our efforts . . . [these leaders] were willing to buy their way out of it. That is like authorizing theft," he maintains. His point was that ending instead of expanding protest efforts, along with the public economic concessions offered without significant input from the unions'

rank-and-file membership bases, all tended to undercut the ongoing struggle then supported by a majority of MTI members and many others. Matthews, however, was a local leader who did not represent WEAC at the state level. He was not regularly involved in the strategy sessions of state labor leaders.

As the film shows, it took some considerable time and effort to remove the occupiers from the State House, and even longer to reduce the protests outside. Later demonstrations peaked at numbers almost certainly exceeding 100,000 in a city with a permanent population only slightly greater than twice that number. The Wisconsin Uprising was almost simultaneous with the Arab Spring of 2011, and like the Arab Spring it became a central focus both nationally and internationally, garnering widespread media coverage and mass support. Famously, someone in Cairo ordered pizzas for the occupiers at the Wisconsin State Capitol. The film also shows how protestors debated other possible strategies: would workplace protests work better? Could a general strike be pulled off?

What Wisconsin dramatized for us, as revealed by Acosta, is the ongoing problem of strategic conservatism in the labor movement. This problem has a basis in the real material situation of workers' organizations, and the way they function today. The effort by union leadership to buy off the Republicans, retrospectively a disastrous miscalculation, seemed sensible to defensive union leaders used to reducing losses through negotiations, and profoundly uncomfortable with mass mobilizations. The defeat in Madison, and the subsequent failed recall efforts, were some of many signs in recent decades of the labor movement encountering limits that it is unable to surmount in its current organizational form. How the movement can find its way toward embracing—and

producing—the democratic spirit that played out in the occupation is far from clear. 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. They do so without the long memories and hard-won strategic instincts that veteran activists have. This is a challenge and an opportunity. 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.

The next time there is something like a Wisconsin Uprising, its participants will again have to ask the questions we see occupiers wrestling with in the film: how far do we go? What is next? What are the risks? Where do the opportunities lie? The best thing the remnants of the surviving labor movement can do is transmit as much of our collective memory and accumulated wisdom to them as possible—not to make them repeat our path, but to enable those who come next to find their own. Acosta's film tells one of many stories that will be needed for this transfer. Wisconsin is home of the Wisconsin Idea, that the state can serve the needs of all of society, not just the elites, and become a true laboratory of democracy. Laboratories, of course, are places where experiments fail, and when that happens it is very important to record what happened and why.

Author Biography

David Nack has worked as an organizer and labor representative for decades, and now teaches at the School for Workers, University of Wisconsin–Extension, and is a member of American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Local 223.