



*Photo taken by Carmen Clark*

## **How Firefighters Respond to the Alarm In Attack on Wisconsin Workers' Rights**

By Estelle Kraimer

Wisconsin's firefighters stood out among heroic first responders to Governor Scott Walker's attack on public employee unions.

In a recent interview with two generations of Firefighters Local 311 presidents, Joe Conway Jr. and Joe Conway Sr., and Mahlon Mitchell, newly-elected president of the statewide Firefighters union, we get insights on how it was done.

The firefighters responded to Walker with a plan. That makes sense. Firefighters can't just come running to a fire, an explosion, or even a cat stranded in a tree without a plan. Lives depend on their teamwork, knowledge, ability to prioritize, preparedness to meet immediate needs, ability to adapt to conditions in a heartbeat, a feel for morale, and an overarching sense of fair play for ordinary people.

Of course, those are the qualities needed by a successful labor movement. And, there's a craft and a legacy here, one that is handed down from one generation of leadership to another. Break that, and you've broken labor's back. Joe Conway, Senior, former president of Local 311 and Joe Conway, Junior, current president of Local 311, are living examples of that tradition and they're willing to share their insights.

### **First Responders**

"It was ridiculous. It had nothing to do with the budget—it was a bill to kill unions. It attacked everyone else, too, not just public workers," Joe Jr. began. "And when there's a divide-and-conquer attitude, you've got to stand up as early as possible.

So, on that first morning when Walker unveiled his so-called "budget repair bill," Local 311 called a special meeting. Normally 20 or 25 members attended meetings, he said, but on that morning 150 showed up. Another 90 were on duty and couldn't attend. In that one-hour meeting they voted to support the teachers and state workers, voted \$20,000 to the fight-back campaign, and resolved to invite all firefighters in surrounding areas to come to the Capitol.

Members with signs were present at the first rally and an estimated 200 firefighters protested at the Capitol on the first day. Firefighter bagpipers and drummers came at noon on the next day and every day for about two months, often at 5 p.m. and often on weekends. Joe Jr. estimates that anywhere from 25 to 500 firefighters marched every day throughout the public response to the Walker bill, and the "Firefighters for Labor" contingent became a staple on the Square.

"We could respond quickly because we had our own resources in place [such as pipers and drummers] and three daily shifts of 70 people going off duty and coming right to the Capitol to march. We're unique that way," Joe Jr. said. "We thought we could provide the visibility for others to grasp onto. We could show that there was some hope to build on."

### **Strategic Thinking**

Joe Jr. said Local 311's goal in the Walker bill protests was to provide strong support and to boost morale.

Father and son agree that firefighters had a leg up since they have been thinking strategically for a long time. Joe Sr., the third president of the Madison firefighters local since it was organized in 1931, said it was easy to see the power of workers when John L. Lewis took the coal miners out in 1941.

"And the union officers drew no salaries during that whole strike," he added.

Worker power also was clear to him in the example of Ford workers taking over their plant in the early union era.

"It takes a lot of thought to go on strike," he said, "but when you are improving the quality of a job, getting pension, and when you get amnesty after you win, it makes that thought and planning worth the effort."

After Wisconsin's state workers struck in 1968, the two state firefighter associations combined and won their first contract in 1971. Local 311 now has more than 400 members, Joe Jr. said. It happened through strategic planning when he became president 10 years ago. At the time, surrounding communities supplied temporary workers to Madison. They might include part-time or full-time staff, paid on-call firefighters and even volunteers.

Under those circumstances it was difficult to organize and negotiate. Wages and benefits were substandard and sometimes arbitrary district boundaries interfered

with rapid response. Then, when firefighters tried to bargain, local fire chiefs and governments often claimed that the union was creating a public safety problem.

“But, we set goals to get everyone in Dane County on the same level of fire service and to have the same wages and benefits for all the emergency workers.”

So, they set out to organize surrounding fire departments into Local 311. Eventually the local would include firefighters in Monona, Oregon, Fitchburg, Sun Prairie, Middleton, Verona and others.

“By putting everybody together, they were only talking to one group—Local 311,” Joe Jr. said. “We were able to show that it was the local fire chiefs who were the real problem. They wanted to rule their little territories.”

Another key part of the Firefighters’ strategic plan, Joe, Jr. said, is to build depth in leadership and empower rank and file members. He said they strive to learn about and use the talents of every member. Those with leadership talent need to be brought along so they can step into good decision-making.

The newly-elected state leadership had only been in office for a few months when Walker unveiled his union-busting plan. Recall that Walker thought he could divide public sector workers by exempting firefighters and cops from his bill. And at first some in the statewide union thought the best thing to do was to stay out of the fight, since it didn’t affect them directly.

But members and veteran leaders urged them to stick with other workers and that the divide and conquer strategy was going to defeat all unions. The new leadership’s outlook quickly changed.

Rallying against the Walker bill, Joe Jr. took some flack for supporting a general strike as a winning strategy, even though the idea has been supported by other unionists and the South Central Federation of Labor.

“You can protest, march, and rally until you’re blue in the face,” he said, “but we didn’t change the votes—not one legislator changed position. The Madison teachers were out for four days. If other groups would have followed, such as AFSCME’s state workers and prison guards, and hooked up with the supporters in the rest of the state, people would have complained and pressured their legislators.”

Father and son agreed that unionists in the U.S. don’t really understand how strikes have worked in American history and throughout the world. Joe Jr. said Wisconsin workers and union leaders were too afraid of losing their jobs or jeopardizing the recall actions. Meanwhile, San Francisco longshoremen held a one-day solidarity strike in support of Wisconsin public workers and Milwaukee Teamsters asked if there were going to be picket lines at loading docks for them to honor.

“The big fear of a strike of public workers is ensuring the general safety. There are ways of doing that and still having a strike,” he said.

He said the tactic was to sustain pressure on the government, to disrupt the day, to rotate daily strikes, and to cover each other for emergency services—not just have a one-day action and quit.

“Make it tough on government. Disrupt service without causing harm. Frustrate the public or raise public concern so they talk to their legislators,” he said.

“People really don’t understand. They need to learn how they did it in Ontario, France, the U.K.,” Joe Sr. added.

Joe Jr. noted that Firefighters Local 311 is different from many unions in that it has a fair amount of autonomy from state and national structures and most dues remain with the local. And that helps build solidarity since members know where decisions are made and how their dues money is being spent.

### **No Altruism Here**

The firefighters’ decision to stand with other public employee unions was not based on altruism, the Conways said, but on the awareness that even if cops and firefighters weren’t initially included in Walker’s attacks on public employees, if he got away with it, they would be next.

“Walker has a divide and conquer attitude. We want to raise all workers up, including ourselves. The role of a union should be to protect the rights and income of its members. Nobody has budgeted for \$4,000 or \$8,000 a year pay cut.”

Joe Jr. said people have to turn around their way of thinking, in order to dig in for battles to come.

“The Republicans aren’t playing by the rules, but our side is playing by bad rules, grumbling about our losses and expecting somebody to ride in at the end of the day and fix it. Hopefully the unions will band together and get back to the day when they were united.”

Education has to be a big priority, he said. In the past, people didn’t need to be shown there is safety in numbers and strength when workers banded together. But American workers today are operating on false beliefs that it’s better to deal with employers individually, that they can prosper off of someone else’s work and let the union get the contract and benefits without belonging or being active members. He emphasized educating members not to knock other unions or badmouth them.

Members should question their union leaders but they should have enough knowledge to question them intelligently so leaders can carry out what an active and educated membership wants them to do.

“That’s what a union is about—common goals not riches. Fair wages, decent benefits, retiring with dignity, and having a pension,” Joe Sr. added.

He should know. He started out as a laborer in the building trades, became a firefighter back when it paid only \$385 a month. Back then he had to wait six months before he could begin participating in the retirement plan and 30 months for hospitalization benefits. He's still a cardholder in Laborers' Union Local 464.

Both Conways explained how important it is to support and build private sector unions today. They said unions have been on the wrong path for the last 10-15 years by not organizing new industries and not showing enough solidarity. Now the percentage of unionized labor in the U.S. will fall below ten percent, if trends don't change.

### **A Place for Leadership**

Joe Jr. said one of the lessons we all learned in the activities around Walker's bill is that there needs to be a centralized group of unionists engaged in strategic planning. He said most union leaders seem not to want to take that role in the recent uprising and, yet, they sometimes undercut others who tried to do it.

"It's awfully important to have what I call formal leaders and informal leaders," Mitchell said. "What you saw throughout this entire movement was people coming out to be informal leaders, at rallies and everything that was going on."

"It all seemed like everything was planned out, such as when we all went to M&I Bank, but everything was being organized as it was happening. People saw a need for something to be done, like protests and speakers inside the rotunda. It all came out in the end, but it wasn't always planned."

"There still has to be someone that has the ability to coordinate with all different groups," says Joe Jr. "We don't all have to have the same message, but that's OK. Each group advances the cause for everyone in its way and each one deserves everyone's support in the movement."

*-Estelle Kraemer is a frequent contributor to Union Labor News.*