

There's no "we" in Wisconsin

Apparently, some forms of class warfare are acceptable after all.

I'd always believed in taking pride in the quality of work I do, of striving for excellence, of going the extra mile. And so, when I was assigned to teach Econometrics – an advanced statistics course – 28 plus years ago, I decided to give the students a real research experience. Over the course of the semester, each student was required to do their own statistical research project, from gathering the data all the way to writing the final report.

Now the thing about teaching a course like that is, it's one heck of a lot more work, even keeping enrollment down to 20 students per section, which we do. Imagine overseeing 20 different research projects all at once, being done by people who've never done statistical research before. It requires hours and hours of working one-on-one, for not one penny of extra pay. But when you're striving for excellence, you go that extra mile.

And excellence we've achieved. As our Economics major has grown, we've gone from a dozen or so to sixty plus students a year graduating with this intensive research experience. We're also averaging over 5 other independent study research projects per year. And we currently have 8 of our Econ graduates enrolled in PhD programs around the country – probably more than UW Milwaukee and UW Madison, combined.

But that kind of achievement takes dedication, and just as there's no "I" in team, it's become increasingly clear that there's no "we" in Wisconsin. As State employees, we've been singled out by our Governor and vilified repeatedly in TV attack ads. And so frankly, I'm finding it hard to muster up a whole lot of dedication any more.

The purported basis of the attacks – that we don't pay into our retirement fund – is sheer accounting sophism. Suppose I hire you, pay you \$10/hr, and also provide you \$4/hr in fringe benefits. Suppose I also hire your brother, pay him \$14/hr, but then withhold \$4/hr to cover his (identical) fringe benefits. Who am I treating unfairly, you or him?

The correct answer is, I'm treating you both the same. Both of you cost me \$14/hr to employ; both of you take home \$10/hr in cash, and \$4/hr in fringes. You both give up \$4/hr in cash to buy those benefits, whether it shows up on the pay stub (his) or not (yours). So the reality is, we state employees "pay" for our retirement benefits, whether Scott Walker is able to figure that out or not.

Despite what the attack ads say, we have shared in the recent economic pain. We've absorbed a 6% pay cut over the last two years. And yes, the balanced needs to be balanced, and we again need to do our share. But this is not shared sacrifice. This is Walker giving his cronies the tax cuts they want, and then denigrating us in as demeaning a fashion as possible. This is Walker singling us out as a class apart – "the haves, not the have-nots" – even announcing in his State of the State that we are "lucky merely to have a job". This is class warfare, pure and simple.

Well, fine. Take your 30 pieces of silver. But realize that there will undoubtedly be consequences to demoralizing a lot of people, especially the people who educate your children. Don't be surprised if school test scores drop; don't be shocked if educational achievement declines.

And don't be surprised if Wisconsin's economic growth suffers. Because the most important ingredient for long term prosperity is human capital, the competencies and skills of our workforce. And those don't grow well in the scorched earth of Walker-style class warfare.