

Right now, state has Team W, Team U and Team D; I'm on Team J

In 20 years of public service as a school board member, full-time mayor and city alderman, I have negotiated dozens of public service contracts for hundreds of employees.

I have been seated across from the head of the teachers union in a gymnasium full of angry teachers worried about benefits. I have been seated in the same gymnasium full of angry constituents worried about property tax rates. My police union sent five negotiators, all in full dress uniform, wearing guns, while the state capped my spending and cut my funding. My firefighters suggested that without a full contingent of 14 firefighters on duty 24/7, people would die, but exceptions could be made for holidays and deer hunting season. My public works guys didn't negotiate at the table, but they did fill every driveway opening in the city with six feet of snow once.

Throughout the years, I felt terrible for teachers who had made a real difference in the lives of students, including my own children, and received far too little for their efforts. I saw public works guys work 48 straight hours without a break to clear a city devastated by a horrible storm and, yes, it was the same group that did the driveway thing — different storm. I saw police officers actually risk their lives for a citizen they didn't even know. I also had to give raises to employees who should have been fired.

What have I learned? It's tough out there. There are no easy answers. The public sector often negotiates with one mindset and works with another. There are many, in fact most, who do their jobs well and work hard regardless of the negotiated outcome. There are a few who feel entitled by the union and occupy space while accomplishing little. It is difficult to reward some and almost impossible to motivate others. I have been told, "You can't fire me," and most often, they were right.

What observation do I have on the cur-



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rent situation? Glad you asked.

First, you need to have a game plan going in and must be prepared to defend it. Team W wanted more participation in health benefits and retirement contributions. Team W did not want a drawn-out negotiation where the end result may have been more compensation to offset the new participation. Team W did not want massive layoffs. Finally, Team W was not willing to raise taxes, period. They counted the votes and determined that they were the only team in town.

Team U wanted none of this but was really upset about not having the opportunity to be a part of the process. Team U would make some concessions because they too are smart enough to count votes. Team U also knows that they will live to fight another day and they were reluctant to turn in their guns, even if they knew they could not be fired at this point. They have been around long enough to know vote counts eventually change.

Of course, we have three teams in the game. Team D is still wondering how they got from Grant Park in Chicago to the Capitol Square in Madison in just two years. They also can count votes and they did not have enough to change things. Their game plan was to leave the field, screaming time out, and try to come up with a game plan.

I for the record am on team J (Jobs). It is about jobs, and being fiscally conservative

is good for jobs. It is about jobs, and a great education system and strong public infrastructure are good for jobs. It is about jobs, and layoffs are, well, not good for jobs.

I have suggested for years that we remove health care from the negotiating table completely by creating, funding and implementing a single state health plan based on the current program. This would be available to all public employees and would be paid for by the state. For those not familiar with the plan, all health care and insurance providers can participate by submitting plans, the state then funds the lowest-cost plan. Employees can choose any of the plans and pay the difference or they can switch to the lowest-cost plan. We could even offer an option for individuals or employers to buy into the program. That would be GREAT for jobs.

While public-sector jobs will not make you rich, the retirement plan is outstanding. If I could participate, I would, and unions paying a little to keep the plan intact is a good strategy, even if they weren't invited to the table. Speaking of the table, I understand the unions would like the opportunity to return to it in the future, so I get that part.

And in the end, it is about jobs — and the message we send to the rest of the nation and the world is important. We clearly have their attention, but I believe we need a better message.

I'd start with this: "We value our taxpayers, our public servants, and our employers. We are Open for Business and we will begin by showing you we can get things done in Wisconsin. We also have the tools for you to get things done in Wisconsin. We believe that jobs are important in Wisconsin. You bring us those jobs and we will give your children the best education in the world, we will provide you the best health care available, and we will plow the roads right to your driveway."

In fact, right into your driveway. ■