

How Dismantling Civil Service in Wisconsin is Happening One Step at a Time

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Gov. Walker and GOP lawmakers in Madison want to change the state's civil service system, eliminating objective civil service exams and replacing them with a subjective review of "qualifications" by their appointees. These changes open the door to hiring partisan political hacks and making party loyalty a qualification for a state job, the very hiring practices that civil service was established to root out.

MADISON - "Please do what you can to stop the dismantling of the civil service system," Mary from Trempealeau County asked me.

Mary is a retired social worker. Her call is one of a number of contacts I received lately from residents unhappy with a bill that would change state employment. Residents expressed concern that government jobs will be filled with political friends and relatives of those in power and will fail to serve its citizens.

A newly introduced bill would do away with examinations for state jobs. Under the bill, every resume for filling 30,000 state positions would go to the behemoth state Department of Administration (DOA) and into the hands of political appointees. The bill would keep employees on probation for two years and use new vague language to fire state employees.

This language includes as grounds for firing "personal conduct" the boss "determines to be inadequate, unsuitable, or inferior". This ambiguous rule could become a proxy for political retribution. Is recall petition signing "inadequate" for a social worker? Is singing union songs in the Capitol rotunda "unsuitable" activity for a scientist? How about a state employee attending a

rally on off time?

The bill opens the door to an employee hiring process completely controlled by politically appointees hired by the Secretary of Administration.

But to understand the context of the newly proposed law, one must step back and look at changes to state employment – especially major changes made just this summer.

Governor Bob La Follette is credited with creation of Wisconsin's civil service system. La Follette wrote in his 1912 autobiography that public service "has been democratized by a civil service law opening it to men and women on an equal footing independent of everything except qualification and fitness for office...There is no longer any political pull in Wisconsin."

Major credit for modernizing the system that eliminated "political pull" should go to Democratic Governor Patrick Lucey and Republican Governor Lee Dreyfus.

In 1976, through executive order, Governor Lucey created the Governor's Employment Relations Study Commission. The Commission recommended a distinct cabinet department, headed by a Secretary appointed by the Governor and confirmed by the Senate. The Commission reasoned that policies related to personnel must have "accountability to the executive office, protection from the possibility of manipulation and independence from the general bureaucratic structure."

According to a paper written by the Legislative Fiscal Bureau "after extensive legislative debate" a new law was passed and signed by Governor Dreyfus creating the Department of Employment Relations. In 2003, the legislature made a number of changes to the department including changing its name to the Office of State Employee Relations (OSER).

The independence of a separate office lasted until this summer when Governor Walker's budget became law. Tucked into the budget was a provision to eliminate OSER and bury its functions in the Department of Administration. I write 'bury' because DOA has a \$2 billion budget and over 1,000 employees making the new employment process opaque to legislators and the people of

the state.

Efforts to politicize employee relations by the current administration began in 2011 with Act 10. This law took 38 civil service positions and made them political appointments. The law also allowed bosses to turn “other managerial positions” into political appointments. Both the 2011-13 budget and the 2013-15 budget added more political appointment positions.

Changes made in 2011 signaled the intention of the administration. But few paid attention to the signs. As an example, here is what I wrote on March 19, 2011:

Yesterday I had an interview with a reporter, and I told her about what the Governor was doing to our civil service put in place by Bob La Follette - how three dozen civil service jobs were made political appointments; how the definition of a political appointment was made so broad the team leader who helps clean the Capitol could be a political appointment. The reporter had no idea this was in the bill.

That bill became Act 10 – known only for stripping public employees of their labor protections, not stripping the citizens of their good government. With the most recent legislation, intentions to politicize state government just became clearer.

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