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'The Rachel Maddow Show' for Thursday, March 17th, 2011

Read the transcript to the Thursday show

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Guests: James Acton, Steve Clemons

RACHEL MADDOW, HOST: Good evening, Lawrence. Thank you for that.

And thanks to you at home for staying with us.

We've got a big update for you this hour on what is going on in Democratic politics—where the fight in the states is changing the whole landscape for Democrats nationally, changing it in their favor.

And we've got the latest on Libya, where Gadhafi is trying to use definitive military force to stop the uprising against him. And the international community, including the United States today, moving for the first time to intervene to stop him. Are you ready for yet another war in the Middle East?

Well, we've got updates on all of that ahead in this hour.

But we start with Japan, where I do actually have some good news to give you, or at least some potentially good news—a way to imagine at least a controlled ending to what is already one of the worst nuclear disasters in world history. There is some good news to give you, but let me start with explaining where we are at today, which is not necessarily good.

The company that owns the Daiichi plant, TEPCO, has provided more specific information now on what exactly is the full extent of the risk here. Even when we think nuclear risks, like when it's joked about on "The Simpsons" with that nuclear plant that looms over everything in Springfield, the risk for a reactor is often portrayed, often thought of as a mushroom cloud.

In fact, the risk is not really a mushroom cloud. There's not a real risk here of a nuclear explosion like you get with a nuclear bomb—a mushroom cloud and all that.

The risk here is the release of radioactivity into the environment.

And the important issue is how much

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radioactivity we are talking about.

TEPCO now clarifies that there are just under 1,500 fuel rod assemblies in all the reactors at Daiichi. Fuel rods are what hold the uranium fuel that releases radioactive gunk into the atmosphere if those fuel rods are damaged. Each fuel rod assembly holds about 380 pounds of uranium.

So, if you do the math, that means in total, the risk we are talking about here is just over a half million pounds of uranium in the reactors. About 260 metric tons of uranium fuel at risk of dumping radioactivity into the environment in Japan.

But wait, there's more. Beyond just what is in the reactors there's also the radioactive fuel that used to be in the reactors that is now being kept at Daiichi as spent fuel. There's more than seven times as much of that at Daiichi as is in the reactors.

TEPCO says there are over 11,000 fuel rod assemblies of spent fuel that are stored in spent fuel pools at Daiichi. You multiply that by how much uranium is in each fuel rod assembly and you get 4.3 million pounds of uranium at risk just in terms of the spent fuel that is stored there. That's over 1,900 metric tons of uranium. That is a lot.

For reference, what blew up at Chernobyl was a reactor with 180 tons of fuel inside.

Even if you are not a science person, even if you are just enough of a news person to be

following this story with concern, it helps to understand what this radioactive stuff is. It is not monolithic.

Spent fuel is fuel that has been used already. It is therefore not as hot or as radioactive as what's in the reactors—and the older it is, the better. But it is still hot. It is still radioactive. And it does still need cooling by a lot of water being circulated over it all the time. And it still melts down and releases radioactivity if it is not cooled.

The difference between the spent fuel and what's in the reactors really functionally right now for all of us worried about this, the difference is that the spent fuel is not nearly as well-protected as what's in the reactors.

The reactor cores are inside hardened internal reactor structures like this, right? The spent fuel is in pools. And it's up here.

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Three-foot-deep—excuse me, 39-foot-deep pools that are not inside the hardened internal reactor structures like the reactor cores are. They're just up there on that fourth floor of those buildings—those buildings that are not in great shape, as can be seen in the first moving pictures released today of reactors three and four. These images were filmed from one of the helicopters that was trying to drop water onto the reactors below. Shredded buildings are what is supposed to contain any radioactivity leaking from spent fuel pools inside those buildings.

Now, that would not be a huge issue if the spent fuel pools were intact, if they were full of water, if those fuel rods were under 20 or 30 feet of water in there, because the water would not only keep those rods cool, the water would also have a shielding effect on the radioactivity as well.

But if the pools are destroyed or empty or leaking or if the water in them is heating up to the point where it may boil off, then the fuel rods in those pools will heat up and start to break down and they will release their radioactivity and it will go into the air. And that may be what has already happened. That may be the cause of the levels of radioactivity at Daiichi now that are described as extremely high.

Radioactivity levels in the air above these karmic-McCarthy-meets-Mad-Max destroyed reactor buildings, radioactivity levels so high that they turned back Japanese security forces aircraft trying to get close enough to help.

Radioactivity levels on the ground at the site high enough to keep Japanese water cannon trucks further away than the 50 yards they wanted to set up at in order to shoot water into those reactors.

And this is not just a tragedy for those workers working at this highly radioactive site. It's not just a tragedy for the site. This is a technical problem.

Remember, the baseline challenge here is to keep as low as possible the amount of radioactivity that's released into the environment. Doing that right now means stopping that spent fuel from emitting all the radioactive gunk it has to offer—radioactive iodine and radioactive cesium and radioactive strontium and more. Stopping those radioactive emissions means getting the fuel covered up with water again and keeping it that way by any means necessary. They need to do that if for no other reason because they

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must keep the plant environment safe enough for people to be able to continue to work there.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

GREG JACZKO, NUCLEAR REGULATORY COMMISSION: We believe that radiation levels are extremely high, which could possibly impact the ability to take corrective measures.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: This is really important. That's the head of the Nuclear Regulatory Commission making the announcement that preceded the U.S. government saying that we think people should evacuate a region even larger than Japan had suggested. It's a short statement that he makes here. I'm just going to play it one more time for emphasis.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

JACZKO: We believe that radiation levels are extremely high, which could possibly impact the ability to take corrective measures.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: Which could possibly impact—which could possibly impact the ability to take corrective measures.

Here's how "The New York Times" explained why that is so important, why I think that sound bite was important enough to play twice. I think they said this exactly right, and it

's really important.

"If the American analysis is accurate and emergency crews at the plant have been unable to keep the spent fuel at that inoperative reactor properly cooled, radiation levels could make it difficult not only to fix the problem at reactor number four but to keep servicing any of the other problem reactors at the plant. In the worst case, experts say, workers could be forced to vacate the plant altogether, and the fuel rods in reactors and spent fuel pools would be left to melt down, leading to much larger releases of radioactive materials."

That's it in a nutshell. That's what's at stake. Stuff has to be kept under control enough there so that the plant doesn't have to be abandoned to meltdown.

I said at the top that there is some good news here, and there is—I promise, that's coming.

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But there is one more element of bad news, or at least news worth understanding as well. This is a new idea that we have not talked about on the show. It is scary-sounding, but it is worth understanding, and it is understandable even if you do not have a scientifically-minded mind.

All right. So the fuel rods are 12-foot-long skinny pieces of metal. They are straws in essence, right? The fuel is actually stacked inside these straws, little tootsie roll-like pellets of uranium.

As the fuel rods get too hot, the metal starts to break down, what happens to those pellets?

Well, if all goes well, maybe the pellets fuse together in the shape they were being held in inside those metal straws. Maybe they stay in an orderly little stack of tootsie rolls.

If all does not go well, those stacks of pellets collapse and the uranium doesn't stay in those orderly rods, it gets into a big, single molten pile.

You've heard the term "critical mass," right? It is dramatic sounding when you're talking about bike protests. It is actually dramatic when you talk about where that term comes from.

If the uranium melting down in a spent fuel pool or reactor is allowed to melt down completely and become one giant molten mass, TEPCO admitted this week that it is possible that nuclear fission could start again.

They call that criticality.

If that happened, there would be an explosion. And after all the efforts to prevent the worst from happening by trying to get water onto these fuel rods, in the event of a full meltdown if all the uranium became one molten pile of muck, then putting it in contact with water would all of a sudden become not a good idea but a very bad idea. It would make a re-criticality more possible, adding water to a molten critical mass of uranium like that. And that would—a re-criticality would generate an explosion big enough to really spew this radioactive gunk very far.

This is not necessarily going to happen. But the risk is, if the meltdown is uncontrolled, that this could happen.

And this is—this is an important point about this. What I just described is not the same as a nuclear explosion. It is not this.

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It would not be a nuclear bomb. It would not be a mushroom cloud.

But it could be a large explosion that spread nuclear material.

Do you remember after 9/11 when we all learned the difference between a nuclear bomb and a dirty bomb? Sort of the same distinction, OK? Not a mushroom cloud but an explosion that would spread radioactive material.

OK. So there's that.

Here's the long-awaited promised good news: all of the problems at the Daiichi plant have been caused by a loss of power—power to fuel the cooling systems to keep the radioactive material there cool and safe. They have now partially reinstated electrical power to the plant. This is good news.

Authorities say they have been able to run a power line powered by the external electrical grid to reactor number two. Reactor number two is the one that doesn't look as bad as the others here.

With electricity, they should be able to power pumps and anything else that is still functional on site for delivering cooling capacity both to the reactors and to the spent fuel pools.

The real question is with all of the damage that was done when they didn't have power, with all of the explosions and everything else, are there enough intact systems still on site that

there is anything functional to plug in to that blessed new power line?

That's next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: There has been an unbelievable amount of dramatic, shattering footage of the catastrophic events in Japan for the last week. There is a scene of the tsunami as it happened that we had not seen until tonight. It is what survival looks like. You will not regret it or forget it. Please stay tuned for that.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

ITN REPORTER: Dramatic pictures released today of the wreckage of the power station that's become a byword for nuclear disaster, Fukushima. This is reactor number three, the

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worst explosion took place here, and this is one of the reactors where concerns about overheating nuclear fuel are growing.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: Footage from ITN news.

I will tell you in the midst of all of this seriousness that my teleprompter has now just gone to footage of a live basketball game, which feels to me like some sort of message from God that I'm doing something wrong.

Joining us now is a physicist named Dr. James Acton, who joins us in order to understand—to help understand the course of events at Fukushima.

Dr. Acton, thanks very much for joining us. I really appreciate your time.

DR. JAMES ACTON, CARNEGIE ENDOWMENT FOR INTL. PEACE: My pleasure, Rachel.

MADDOW: Engineers were able to connect an external grid power line cable to unit two today. How important is that? How will connecting power to the unit two reactor help the overall safety situation at Daiichi?

ACTON: Well, Rachel, you focused in your introduction on this issue of the spent fuel pools. And that's one thing we're worried about.

But if you remember, this crisis started off and continued with the issue of these rods in the

reactor core, the rods that we're worried about overheating and melting. And the hope is that when you connect power to unit two, the cooling systems are going to start up again and you'll be able to get the core under control. But the key point was what you said at the end of your intro, which is that we don't know whether the systems within the reactor are working.

MADDOW: In terms of reactor two—obviously, when we look at the images of the entire Daiichi plant, unit two seems to be in the best physical shape in terms of what we can see of the external containment structure.

Is there reason to assume that the—that there's likely to be more to plug into at reactor two than at any of the other sites? Is it likely that that's why they are focusing on getting power back to that site, because it can do the most good there?

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ACTON: I'm not exactly sure why they made the decision to go for unit two first. But if you remember, a couple of days ago, there was an explosion. And unlike the explosions we saw at one and three that led to all that mangled mess on the outside of the plant, the explosion at two was on the inside of the plant, and it has potentially damaged that key giant concrete and reinforced—reinforced concrete and steel, tomb-like internal containment structure.

So, my guess, and this is only just a guess, is that when they made the decision about where they were going to lay this line to, they decided that reactor two was the one they were most worried about the core melting, and that's why they decided to go for that reactor rather than the others. But as I say, that's just my best guess.

MADDOW: In terms of what might happen and how they're sort of triaging the different reactors and the different areas of this plant that require attention, how concerned are you about the fission, nuclear fission process starting again, about there being a re-criticality in one of these reactors or in one of the spent fuel pools?

ACTON: Well, the truth is, Rachel, it's actually very hard to know. These reactors and these spent fuel pools are in a regime that they were never designed to operate in. And there's actually a lot of disagreement within the technical and scientific communities about exactly what the risks are here.

Let me give you one example. On this issue of whether the fuel rods in the spent fuel pools can start burning if the water level drops—you know, the National Academy of Science wrote a report in 2006 saying this was something they were worried about. The Department of Energy is reported to have done a report in which they say they thought this was very unlikely or would at least take a very long time. And if it doesn't start burning and melting, then you can't get this radioactive mush.

So, the truth is part of the challenge here is the risks are exceptionally hard to assess.

MADDOW: In terms of what the—what we can read from the actions of the people who are closest to the disaster, it's striking that as the United States, as the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission was highlighting their concerns about the spent fuel pool at reactor four, the Japanese started concentrating their most desperate efforts, dropping liquid from

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helicopters, using fire hoses and water cannons from the ground, they started focusing their efforts on reactor three.

What we know is different about reactor three is that it uses a different kind of fuel. It uses a fuel they call MOX, a Mixed Oxide Fuel.

Should we take their focus on reactor three as a sign of concern that a reactor with that kind of fuel is potentially more dangerous than another if something bad happens?

ACTON: Probably not I think is the answer to that one. I don't know why they decided to focus their energies on getting the water into the spent fuel pool three. But the reports that I've heard coming out of Japan are that both pool three and pool four are short of water. So maybe they decided that the situation at pool three was more critical than the situation at pool four.

I don't think this decision was primarily motivated by the MOX fuel issue.

MADDOW: OK.

You have had I know a chance to look at some of the radiation readings from Japan outside the 12-mile evacuation zone. What are you able to tell from those readings in terms of how far the radiation has spread and what that means in terms of human health consequences?

ACTON: Well, on site, the radiation levels are pretty high at the moment and worryingly so.

Off site, the radiation levels are above background and substantially so.

But the good news is that as they stand at the moment, they don't pose a significant threat to human health. Now, that might change. If they stay at their elevated levels for a significant length of time, something on the order of three or four months, then there might be an increased long-term cancer rate at key points. If the plants spew out significantly larger amounts of radiation and so the levels of site rise, then there's likely to be health consequences.

But right now, as it stands in this very uncertain fluid situation, the data that I saw today off plant radiation readings was reassuring.

MADDOW: James Acton, associate in the nuclear policy program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace—thank

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you very much for your time tonight. I'm sorry that I had to introduce you while watching basketball. But it didn't knock you off your stride, and for that I'm doubly appreciative. Thank you.

ACTON: Thank you for having me, Rachel.

MADDOW: It has been hard to think about—hard to report about almost anything but Japan for almost a week now. But in the meantime, Moammar Gadhafi has gone so far in his effort to maintain dictatorial power in his country that the U.N. Security Council decided today it had officially had enough.

The latest from Libya, plus more ahead about the big turn in American domestic Democratic politics—when we come back.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: For the first time, the international community is directly intervening militarily in Libya. The U.N. Security Council today authorizing all necessary measures to protect Libyan civilians from Moammar Gadhafi, including but not limited to a no-fly zone—the resolution passing in a 10-0 vote tonight at the Security Council. Five countries that had been expected to not support a no-fly zone, including Russia and China, abstained from the vote instead of voting no.

Part of the urgency driving today's vote was Mr. Gadhafi's military advance on Benghazi. Benghazi is Libya's second largest city. It is a stronghold of the rebel forces. Gadhafi himself

phoned in to Libyan state TV today to promise a massive offensive tonight against Benghazi.

(BEGIN AUDIO CLIP)

MOAMMAR GADHAFI, LIBYAN LEADER (through translator): Prepare yourselves for tonight—the traitors, the heretics. There will be no mercy, no compassion. We'll tumble the walls on top of you, wall to wall.

(END AUDIO CLIP)

MADDOW: How did the residents of Benghazi react to that? Well, thousands of people gathered in the main square in Benghazi and shouted at the television screen there in defiance. Others in town reportedly fled toward the Egyptian border.

Hours after Gadhafi's threats on state TV, thousands of people still in Benghazi watching, again, on television as the U.N.

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Security Council voted to give them as yet undefined international military assistance. The crowds erupted into cheers when the measure passed, fired guns into the air. They set off fireworks in celebration.

The nation of Italy says it is offering its air bases to launch a no-fly zone operation. The nation of France says it supports military action beyond a no-fly zone immediately.

As for the U.S., our government says we are preparing for action. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton earlier today on a visit to Tunisia, right next door to Libya, laid out exactly what such action could be.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

HILLARY CLINTON, SECRETARY OF STATE: A no-fly zone requires certain actions taken to protect the planes and the pilots, including bombing targets like the Libyan defense systems.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: In other words, enforcing a no-fly zone in some ways looks a lot like waging a war.

So far, the uprisings against the Arab dictators have been domestic affairs, people rising up on their own terms to define their own futures—the prospect both exhilarating and a little worrying for Western countries standing on the sidelines.

Now, with western intervention in Libya declared today, does that now make Libya a qualitatively different kind of fight? Is this the West's war now?

Joining us now is Steve Clemons of the New America Foundation. He is publisher of "The Washington Note."

Steve, it's nice to see you. Thanks for your time tonight.

STEVE CLEMONS, NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION: Thank you, Rachel.

MADDOW: How much intervention do you think we are talking about here? What do you think the U.S. and other western countries will end up doing in Libya now that this resolution is passed?

CLEMONS: Well, if the rebels in Benghazi can hold out another day or two days, I expect you

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're going to be seeing immediate action. The French have been straining at the bit to come in.

But fundamentally, you've got to coordinate the actions of others. Hopefully, there will be Arab participants that come into this that are also part of the action. I think it's very potentially nasty if it's only Western NATO forces that are coming in to Libya that we can talk about that in a moment perhaps.

But I suspect that what Hillary Clinton just said is that you're going to see the targeting of various forms of defensive capacity. The beginning of doing things we should have done I think a week ago, which was scrambling and jamming Gadhafi's ability to communicate with his forces. And hopefully some rearming and reequipping of the opposition forces with their own ammunition and capacity to fight this war.

I think it's very important we try to keep this their war and not our war. And I think it's very important you that raise this issue because the frame now changes. It now comes into what are we doing as opposed to more exclusively what are these brave protesters able to do on their own?

MADDOW: Yes. And to that point, Steve, one of the concepts that President Obama himself has articulated about Egypt and about other uprisings in this region is that Western intervention can undermine the character of these uprisings. It can do more harm to the rebels' cause than good if it changes the

framing of these things dramatically enough. How do you think that concern balances against the desire to intervene in this case in Libya?

CLEMONS: I think they're—what Bob Gates has been trying to say at various places in this debate I think is that we need to be careful about the size of our footprint in what we choose to do.

I think Gadhafi's a monster. I want the opposition to get rid of him, but at the same time if we help an opposition win where fundamentally we've embedded ourselves so deeply in helping a side win a civil war and our ships and fighters and planes and bombs have helped turn this around.

And we're embedded, we don't have a very good legacy of showing, one, that we can get out and two, we undermine I think the legitimacy of part of those forces that won.

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That immediately you get another side that begins to challenge the legitimacy of one faction of the opposition as having sold out to the west.

The narrative of western intervention and humiliation of that area of the world by western powers is a very, very strong narrative in these societies. And it's almost as if we're not talking about that at all here and that worries me.

MADDOW: Steve, have we also been focusing too much tactically on the no-fly zone itself?

CLEMONS: Yes.

MADDOW: I mean, I'm no expert about these things, but it seems to me like a no-fly zone itself will not necessarily turn the military tables in the rebels' favor. Gadhafi is not winning these fights mostly because of fighter jets, it doesn't seem.

CLEMONS: Well, I've been one of others, Richard Haas and others saying, you know, we're running to this as an emotional holding place for ourselves because we want to help those people and I understand that motion.

So no-fly zone, because we did this in Iraq, the British and Americans imposed a no-fly zone there. It seemed to be the easiest in our own minds of something that could be done that could keep these bombers and aircraft of ravaging and just terrorizing the Libyan opposition.

But it doesn't change the facts on the ground. And Gadhafi has more than enough resources, and he's armed himself well with infantry and tanks. So what we saw, when you talk to Libyan opposition, I've just returned from the Middle East in Doha and was able to meet with a couple of the opposition leaders who explained to me what was happening is they were literally running out of ammunition in these cities that were just close to Tripoli.

And they were being pushed back and they could not get ammunition quickly enough and supplies quickly enough. Even with the French recognizing the Libyan opposition council. The French were not yet supplying the weapons systems. So we're all rather late in trying to do the low—the small footprints kinds of things that would have helped the opposition stand stronger against Gadhafi.

I think we could have been feeding them intelligence. We could have been scrambling

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his communications and blocking his communications rather than him being able to scramble and block theirs. So to a certain degree the no-fly zone was a holding place for our own emotional sentiment of wanting to help people.

But we weren't asking what was most efficacious in actually helping the opposition to stand their ground and hopefully to keep the dynamics running against Gadhafi.

MADDOW: And with the no-fly zone being the focus of it, I think not as much focus today on the fact that what just passed today authorizes all necessary measures here. So whatever happens with the no-fly zone, this is now starting.

This is now starting internationally. Steve Clemons of "The Washington Note." Steve, thank you. It's great to have your insight on this stuff. I always appreciate it.

CLEMONS: Thank you, Rachel.

MADDOW: So at home in domestic politics here Republicans won a bunch of legislative seats and a bunch of governorships in the last elections.

What they have decided to do with that new governing authority is apparently to wake up the democratic base like nothing the Democrats themselves could ever have planned to do. That's next before we're back to Japan.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE (voice-over): This is the moment a driver was hit by the wave while he was videoing his own journey. You can see how the giant wave came without warning, crashing over the wall and the vehicle in front.

The road swallowed up by the sea as the car is submerged in water. You can't hear the reaction of the driver on the tape, but it's clearly amazing that anyone made it out of the car. The footage reveals how people were completely unaware of the impending tsunami threat.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: That was video taken Friday when the tsunami hit northeastern Japan. In just a few minutes, we've got some more absolutely

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incredible footage we had not seen before that is from that day.

A Japanese news crew kept the camera rolling as they made the life-saving decision to get out of the car they were in and make a run for it as the tsunami waters rose and rose very quickly. That footage is coming up in just a moment. You will want to see it.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: We've got further updates for you on the situation in Japan coming up, including some of the assets Americans did not necessarily know our country had before this crisis, but now that we're in this kind of crisis it is good to know we've got them and that they are deploying. That is ahead.

But before we do that, we have to be the place for politics again here for a second because while the crisis in Japan is happening, while the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa have started to turn into the wars in the Middle East and North Africa, wars that maybe garnering international and American intervention now.

While all those things are happening, domestic politics, red versus blue politics here in the U. S., have taken a remarkable turn and it is not coming from Washington. Where it is coming from is next.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: In terms of our news coverage

recently, events here in the United States have taken a pretty distant back seat to the events in Japan at least for the last week.

That is not to say that what was going strong a week ago in Wisconsin is not still going on strong not just in Wisconsin but all over the middle of the country. In Washington, it's the same old same old. Republicans have decided that they like talking about jobs, but what they like doing is waging 1990s culture war, pushing to overrule local control of public schooling in Washington, D.C., voting to defund NPR in the House today, railing against planned parenthood and contraception, contraception, the horror.

Pushing yet more anti-abortion legislation, including their latest bill, which is a beautiful reverse toe loop triple axel hypocritical message disaster of actually raising taxes in order to make access to abortion more difficult.

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Now, in Washington it is not only nothing new right now, Republican politics are so old school it's like a time machine, right down to today's headlines about Newt Gingrich still wanting people to think he's running for president and the way he thinks he's going to get that is by being really super anti-gay.

For Washington Republicans "E.R." and "Touched By an Angel" just aired their pilot episodes. For Washington Republicans Robin Williams is still best known for "Mork and Mindy." This big shift that is happening in Republican politics is happening not in Washington. It is happening in the states.

This is footage from the Michigan State Capitol last night, where thousands of people protested and several were arrested. They were protesting the package of bills just signed by Michigan's Republican Governor Rick Snyder, who was vying with Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker for the Dick Cheney prize as the Republican who does the most good for democratic politics, as the Republican who most unifies and mobilizes Democrats and independents and even many Republicans against really unpopular extremism in the republican party.

Governor Snyder's union stripping, his imposition of what's being called financial martial law to rip contracts and union rights and even local elections away from Michigan cities and towns if Snyder decides to, his massive new taxes on the old and the poor in Michigan in order to give away those revenues to corporations as tax breaks, to not only fix

the hole in the budget.

This is an agenda that has shocked and galvanized and angered a lot of people in Michigan, just as it has in Wisconsin. I want to show you the headlines that ran in newspapers around the state of Wisconsin on the day that Scott Walker signed the union-stripping bill there.

Now, this was the day that Walker held his big bill signing, right? This is supposed to be his victory lap. This is what local and regional papers looked like across Wisconsin on the day of Walker's would-be victory lap. "The Reporter" newspaper of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, "Did GOP break the Law?"

"The Post Crescent" newspaper of Appleton, Wisconsin, "Bill Passes Amid Outcry." "The Daily Tribune" of Wisconsin Rapids, "Protesters Say Fight's Not Over." "The Wausau Daily Herald," "More Protesters on the

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Way,” “Thousands from Local Union Expected to Join Group this Weekend.”

And then there was this one, this one from the “Oshkosh Northwestern.”

This one may be the single most significant headline of that entire day. “Bargaining Battle Turns to Ballot Box.” That was the headline the day after this big union-stripping bill passed in Wisconsin.

“Bargaining Battle Turns to Ballot Box.” This is the key. This is the most important thing to pay attention to in trying to determine whether or not Democrats are going to be able to turn the pyrrhic nature of this Republican victory in Wisconsin into something that both stops what the Republicans are doing here.

And that exacts a political cost from the Republicans for having done it in the first place. A couple of states over from Wisconsin, in Ohio Democrats have been under no illusions that they have any real chance of stopping a union-stripping bill there because they’re so outnumbered by the Republicans in the state legislature.

And what Republicans—excuse me, what Democrats have been saying from the very beginning is if and when you Republicans do this, this is what we’re planning on doing, a statewide referendum. You want to pass your union-stripping bill you? Go for it, Republicans. We’re going to let the voters decide what they think of that.

This is not an idle threat from the Democrats in Ohio. This is a threat that means something there. The reason Ohio Democrats have been threatening that and, I don’t know, maybe the reason why Republicans there are now slow-walking their union-stripping efforts there, it’s because they know the history on this.

The last time Republicans in Ohio mounted this sort of an attack on people who work for a living was back in 1958. Republicans wanted to outlaw union shops with a constitutional amendment that they put before the state’s voters. They were just going to roll back union rights.

Guess what happened. Ohio voters not only rejected the Republicans’ big union-busting idea, they rejected it by a 2-1 margin. They overwhelmingly opposed the Republican-led efforts to strip union rights. They also replaced the Republican governor with a Democratic one.

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And in that same election they gave Democrats both Houses of the state legislature and every statewide office outside of the courts and every single statewide office except for the secretary of state. Good job, Republicans.

Not only did your union-busting referendum get absolutely trounced, you got trounced, too. You got voted out of power for having tried it. The anti-union measure that Ohio Republicans wanted back then is not exactly the same thing as what's being proposed now, but it is roughly the same size, same shaped punch aimed directly at the middle class.

And the great majority of working people reacted to it back then as you might expect. Democrats do not always remember that their base is people who have to work for a living. Democrats do not always remember that the corporate interest party is the other guys and that they're supposed to represent people who corporate interests would prey on if they didn't have somebody defending them.

Democrats don't always remember that. But when Democrats do remember that, they usually reap great electoral reward for it. When Democrats push for economically populist ideas, when they push for things that economically benefit working people, it is the closest thing there is to electoral magic for the Democratic Party.

In 2006, Democrats won huge landslide victories in the House and the Senate. Some of those victories were the result of national trends in the country at the time, people being

really against the Iraq war, for example. But in a few cases there was something really specific at work.

In the great state of Missouri, for example, Democrat Claire McCaskill managed to unseat incumbent Republican Senator Jim Talent. It was one of the biggest upsets that election night. How did it happen? Well, that Senate race was not the only big thing on the ballot in Missouri that day.

There was also a proposition on the ballot to raise the state's minimum wage. Claire McCaskill was quite emphatically for it. Jim Talent tried not to take a position on it at all. There was almost nothing in politics that turns out Democratic voters more than initiatives to raise the minimum wage.

And in Missouri that ended up being great news for Claire McCaskill. The minimum wage initiative passed with 76 percent of the vote,

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76 percent and Claire McCaskill unseated Jim Talent. She won by 2.3 percent. You think people turning out to vote 76 percent in favor of raising the minimum wage had anything to do with that victory?

When the story of that election upset was finally written, here's how it was written. "Research showed that Democrats in Missouri were twice as likely to vote for Senate challenger Claire McCaskill, who upset Republican incumbent Jim Talent, because of an initiative to increase the state's minimum wage."

That was from "Congressional Quarterly." Had that minimum wage initiative not been on the ballot in 2006, Democratic voters probably would not have turned out in the numbers they did, and it is very likely we would not currently have a Senator Claire McCaskill, Democrat, of Missouri.

According to an analysis by the "American Prospect" quote, "the minimum wage proposition passed in every county, winning 76 percent of the statewide vote. The grassroots get out the mounted by ACORN and labor unions on behalf of the minimum wage initiative helped put McCaskill over the top. So who must be destroyed?"

The people that work for the minimum wage initiative, ACORN and the labor unions. Now one down and one to go on that. This is the most potent political issue Democrats have. It energizes Democratic voters in a way that almost no other issue does, economic

populism. This is the reason the Democratic Party exists, defending people who work for a living and advancing their interests.

Economic populism wins for Democrats every time. If you want a Democrat to win an election put economic populism on the ballot. Put something like a minimum wage initiative on the ballot. Put Republican efforts to strip union rights on the ballot and get ready to meet every heroic public school teacher and every firefighter and everyone who ever learned math from that teacher or had their house saved by that firefighter, get ready for America to hoist main street heroes on to the crowd's shoulders.

Democrats look at these headlines across Wisconsin and say, yes. Enjoy your signing ceremony, Gov. This is the best gift you could have ever given us. When economic populism is on the ballot, Democrats win in part because it's not just liberals who support things like

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raising the minimum wage. It's conservatives, too.

You don't get 76 percent of the vote for something with only liberals voting, particularly in Missouri. What happens when Democrats decide to champion the cause of the rights of people who work for a living is that they broaden their base of support.

A man named Dick Church from Oshkosh, Wisconsin, not a member of a public sector union. He is not a Democrat, but here is what he told the Oshkosh "Northwestern" newspaper, the day Republican Governor Scott Walker signed Wisconsin's union stripping bill. He said, quote, public sector workers just keep giving and giving, but they get nothing back. I used to be a Republican but after what's happening, after what's been happening, I just can't do it."

Wisconsin Republicans wrote their union stripping legislation so it essentially can't be cleanly recalled by the voters as a standalone measure. It is tucked inside a big omnibus budget repair bill so the Wisconsin state legislature would have to overturn it and that's why you're seeing all of this energy, all of this mobilization around these efforts to recall the Republican state senators.

If Wisconsin Democrats can keep everybody focused on the fact that recalling those senators is how you start to overturn this bill, they will have the tiger by the tail. In Michigan, it's the same story. Expect general election ballot measures to overturn what Rick

Schneider and the Republicans have done in Michigan.

Maybe even to amend the state constitution to protect union rights for teachers and firefighters and other public sector workers. Maybe even an effort already to recall Governor Schneider of Michigan after he's been in office about five minutes.

In Missouri? In Missouri—in Missouri that minimum wage raise in Missouri that got 76 percent of the vote? Republicans in Missouri are now trying to vote to lower that minimum wage again. Senator Claire McCaskill just sent out a raise the alarm e-mail to Missouri voters pointing out Missouri Republicans are trying to do that, lower the minimum wage.

She says it's Republicans, quote, "taking a 2 x 4 to Missouri working families, which is both true and has the added benefit of jump-starting the economic populist divide that

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drives more enemies against the Republican Party and more support for the Democratic Party than anything else in American politics.

They would have captured the closest thing to electoral magic that exist in American politics if they can convert these things to the ballot.

(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

MADDOW: A local Japanese news crew in the hard hit city of Sendai had their camera rolling when the tsunami hit northeastern Japan on Friday. They were in a taxi seconds before the catastrophe happened.

Britain's Channel 4 broadcast this tape earlier today. The voice you'll hear is a reporter and it is an incredible moment and incredible that it was captured on film. Please watch.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE (voice-over): These are the decisions that keep you alive—stay in the car or run for it. They run, telling the driver to do the same. Keep running or find shelter. They find a building, the water pooling at their feet now.

Look at the height of that white wall. Very soon, the water will reach the top of it. The canopy over the gate will become a bridge. As they climb the stairs, the tsunami bursts through the corridor. They reach the window as two huge red containers sweep across the path.

Leaving the taxi was a good decision. It's now floating, but not everyone made shelter. There is a woman on the wall, a man in a tree and standing on a car roof a father clutching his two young children. Someone finds a fire hose. It becomes a rope.

As snow falls, the man from the tree makes it in. As dusk falls, a human chain is formed and reaches the children. Despite the aftershocks, despite the snow, they pass the children from person to person across the tops of shipping containers.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

MADDOW: The footage as broadcast and edited by Britain's Channel 4. The footage was shot by a local Japanese news crew who survived the tsunami and then helped other people do the same. Incredible. Thank you for being with us tonight. We will see you again tomorrow night. Now, it is time for the "THE ED

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