

Ohio governor signs law attacking public employees

Jerry White
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After more than a month of protests, the Republican governor of Ohio signed Senate Bill 5 in a brief statehouse ceremony Thursday evening, putting into a law an unprecedented attack on the 360,000 workers who provide public services in the Midwestern US state.

The law bans the right of public workers to strike; imposes large wage cuts by mandating workers to pay at least 15 percent of their health insurance costs; bases pay raises for teachers and other workers on performance instead of seniority; and facilitates the decertification of local unions. It also allows school districts, municipalities and other government bodies to impose their final offer if a labor agreement cannot be reached in negotiations.

Governor John Kasich is the latest Republican state executive to gut public employee collective bargaining rights. On March 11, Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker signed into law a similar attack after a month of job actions, student walkouts and mass protests. Republicans in Indiana, Michigan, Arizona and other states are pursuing similar policies.

In a fundraising email sent out by Kasich after the bill's passage, the governor declared, "The nation is watching us in Ohio and we will provide the leadership necessary to become a job creating state and serve as a model for the rest of America."

In fact, the anti-worker laws are aimed at outlawing collective resistance to sweeping cuts in social spending and the virtual destruction of public education and other essential services. The aim is to further reduce taxes on the corporations and big investors who created the economic disaster, which has bankrupted virtually every state in the nation.

Kasich's "Jobs Budget" proposal slashes education,

health care and other programs critical to the state's 11.5 million residents. This includes a \$1 billion cut in state aid to local governments over the next two years; a 10-11 percent cut in K-12 and higher education; and savage cuts to childcare and medical services that would, among other things, limit the number of hours of mental health care patients can receive.

The massive cuts in state aid to local governments and school districts will be used to wrench even greater concessions from public workers. "We've got 10 percent of people without jobs. Be glad you have a job," the *Columbus Dispatch* quoted Representative Louis Blessing, a Republican from Cincinnati, telling public workers. "Would you rather have no job or a pay cut of 4 percent? That's basically what we're telling public employees. Congratulations, you've done a great job since (collective bargaining) was enacted 27 years ago, but the party's over. We can't afford it anymore."

In his budget proposal, Kasich continues the 21 percent cut in state income-tax rates that was part of the 2005 tax overhaul by Republicans that replaced the state corporate income tax and phased out a business property tax. These measures cost the state more than \$2 billion a year in lost tax revenue, half of the state's \$8 billion budget gap over the next two fiscal years.

"At least half of our current budget problem is a direct result of the tax changes we made in 2005," Zach Schiller, research director at Policy Matters Ohio, told the *Columbus Dispatch*. "A lot of people don't want to hear that, but that's the reality. Much of our pain is self-inflicted."

There is enormous working class opposition to Kasich's attack on public workers and social spending, and thousands of public employees have taken part in

protests over the last month. The state capitol in Columbus was packed with workers booing and shouting as legislators voted for the bill Tuesday night.

As in Wisconsin, however, the officials who lead the teachers and other public employee unions accept without question that workers must pay for the budget deficit and have offered their services to do so. They only oppose the Republican Party's attempt to push the unions out of their traditional role of imposing the cuts, and, above all, collecting union dues.

Union officials were particularly angered over a new provision added to the bill this week that would ban "fair share" fees—union dues paid by public workers who decide not to join their union. Under current rules, public workers who do not want to join a union must still pay dues.

State Democrats, whose counterparts in New York, California, Illinois and other states are imposing spending cuts just as vicious as the Republicans'—made it clear they want to utilize the services of the unions to slash public employees' pay and benefits. As the *Columbus Dispatch* noted, "Rep. Matt Szollosi, D-Oregon, said if governments need to contain costs, they can ask for the kind of concessions a number of state and local unions have given in recent years."

With the passage of the bill, the Democrats are now working with union officials to divert anger into a petition campaign for a referendum vote to overturn the new law. The Democrats and unions are reportedly spending \$10 million to \$20 million to collect more than 230,000 signatures needed to place the issue on the ballot in November.

This follows the same pattern as in Wisconsin, where the unions opposed any serious struggle—including rejecting demands for a general strike—and worked with the Democrats to divert working class opposition behind a toothless campaign to recall Republican legislators. Meanwhile, the unions have taken advantage of legal rulings that have delayed the implementation of the law to sign scores of contracts that gut wages, benefits and working conditions, while preserving the automatic dues check-off system, which will be prohibited once the law goes into effect.

Well aware that tens of millions of workers are disgusted with the refusal of the Obama administration to address their economic and social concerns—including his refusal to bail out the states—the

campaigns launched by the unions and the state Democrats in Ohio, Wisconsin and other states are aimed at boosting the electoral fortunes of the Democratic Party in 2012. The goal of this is to secure the interests of the union apparatus, while the attacks on the working class would continue unabated.



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