

The Wisconsin recall election

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The outcome of the recall elections in the US Midwestern state of Wisconsin is an indictment of the trade unions and their liberal and “left” allies who subordinate the working class to the Democratic Party.

Five months ago, the unions shut down mass protests by workers against Republican Governor Scott Walker’s anti-worker measures, claiming that the struggle would continue through a campaign to recall Republican legislators and replace them with supposedly “pro-labor” Democrats. On Tuesday, state Democrats were defeated in four out of six races, leaving Republicans in control of the state Senate by one seat.

From the beginning, the recall campaign was a reactionary diversion, aimed at demobilizing and suppressing working class opposition. The Democratic candidates made no secret of their support for cuts in social spending and attacks on public employees. Had the Democrats won control of the Senate, there would be no significant change in government policy in relation to the basic rights and interests of the working class.

The central lesson that emerges from the experience of the Wisconsin protests is the need for a revolutionary party and perspective to lead the struggles of the working class.

The movement that erupted last winter—the largest working class struggle in a quarter of a century—was the initial response of American workers to the relentless attack on jobs and living standards that has followed the economic crash of 2008. It was part of an international upsurge of the working class, beginning with the revolutionary upheavals in Tunisia and Egypt that inspired workers and youth in Wisconsin.

The unions, which did not initiate the protests, were opposed to any genuine mobilization of the working class. From the beginning, the leaders of the teachers and state employee unions signaled their willingness to

work with Walker to impose \$330 million in concessions on their members. At the same time, they limited the struggle to protecting the narrow self-interests of the labor bureaucracy, above all, the continued deduction of union dues from workers’ paychecks.

They were aided by a host of liberals and pseudo-lefts, from John Nichols of the *Nation* publication to the International Socialist Organization, which upheld the authority of the unions and portrayed the Democrats as steadfast allies in the struggle against Walker.

In fact, the Democrats—who fled the state to delay a vote on Walker’s bill and take the initiative out of the hands of the workers themselves—fully supported the governor’s demand that public employees pay for health care and pensions. They castigated Walker for provoking a social explosion, boasting that they had made the biggest cuts in state history precisely by working with the unions.

In opposition to the anti-working class lineup, the Socialist Equality Party explained that Wisconsin workers were in a struggle against both big business parties and had to reject their demands that workers pay for the state deficit and crisis of the capitalist system. The SEP raised the demand for a general strike to mobilize the full strength of the working class to drive out the Walker administration and fight for policies, including a sharp increase in taxes on the rich, to defend and expand public education, decent-paying jobs and other social rights.

The fight for the industrial and political mobilization of workers, we insisted, was possible only by breaking the stranglehold of the unions, forming rank-and-file committees to take control of the struggle, and rejecting any alliance with the Democratic Party.

The March 9 decision by the Republicans to ram through legislation provoked outrage and sentiment for a general strike grew. It was precisely at this point that

the unions moved to call off the demonstrations. Fearing that the union leadership could lose control of the situation, the head of the teachers union ordered educators to report to work until union leaders decided on the “next step.” The only recourse workers had, the president of the Wisconsin Public Employees Union declared, was to “change the face of the government” by campaigning to recall Republican state senators.

The supposedly “far left” ISO, which was involved in organizing the occupation of the State Capitol building, joined in the effort to bolster the Democrats whom they had invariably described as being on the side of workers. In a statement following the passage of Walker’s bill, the ISO praised the political stunt carried out by the 14 Democratic senators who left the state, saying, “The ‘Flight of the Fourteen’ Democrats is a reminder—and a needed one after so many years with few if any examples—that Democratic politicians can be pressured to act by mass protest.”

Such statements make it clear that groups like the ISO are nothing more than the left wing of the bourgeois establishment, whose central political role is to channel social opposition within the confines of the Democratic Party.

On the eve of the recall vote, John Nichols of the *Nation* wrote that a Democratic victory “could force Walker and his Republican allies to negotiate—and ultimately to moderate extreme positions.” Now, Nichols is calling on Wisconsin workers to spend the next year trying to recall Governor Scott Walker. This political fraud, which is bound up with the *Nation*’s effort to boost Obama’s reelection prospects in 2012, should be rejected out of hand.

Democratic-controlled state governments around the country, most recently in Connecticut, have carried out attacks on public employees and social spending just as savage as their Republican counterparts. On the federal level, President Obama just joined the Republicans in cutting trillions and setting the stage for the dismantling of once-untouchable entitlement programs.

With the world economy on the precipice of an even deeper downturn, including a double-dip recession in the US, the political establishment in every country, speaking on behalf of the most powerful sections of the corporate and financial elite, is demanding that workers sacrifice their basic social rights to prop up the profits of the ruling class and their bankrupt capitalist system.

The month-long struggle in Wisconsin was only a taste of the explosive social struggles to come, including in Wisconsin itself. It was also an audition for the roles that will be played by different political forces. Arrayed against the working class are the Democratic Party, the anti-labor trade unions and the liberal and phony left defenders of the status quo. On the other side is the Socialist Equality Party, which proved in its leadership and political program that it alone defends the interests of the working class.

If new struggles, such as the strike by 45,000 Verizon workers, are not to be diverted and defeated, then a new revolutionary leadership must be built. The SEP is spearheading the fight for the industrial and political mobilization of the working class against the capitalist system and for socialism. We are confident that the SEP can win the leadership of the coming struggles and urge all workers and youth who agree with this fight to join and build our party.

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