

Anti-worker legislation faces referendum vote in Ohio

Jerry White

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A ballot initiative today in the US state of Ohio will determine the fate of the anti-worker legislation passed by the Republican state legislature earlier this year.

Ballot “Issue 2” calls for an up or down vote on Senate Bill 5, which strips the state’s 400,000 public employees of workplace rights, forces them to pay sharp increases in health care and pension contributions and bans strikes and other forms of collective resistance.

The Socialist Equality Party calls for workers to reject the Senate bill by voting “no” on Issue 2. However, workers can place no confidence in the coalition of trade unions and Democratic Party politicians backing the “no” vote campaign.

Ohio Governor John Kasich signed SB 5 into law last March. This was a time when Republican governors and legislatures in Wisconsin, Indiana and other states were passing similar laws to virtually criminalize efforts by public employees to collectively defend their jobs, living standards and working conditions.

Among its major provisions, SB 5 would:

- Limit collective bargaining by public employees to wages and hours and excluding negotiations over employee qualifications, work assignments and staffing levels;
- Ban strikes and impose penalties “equal to twice the employee's daily rate of pay” for each day an employee is considered to be on strike;
- Eliminate tenure and minimum annual salaries for teachers and institute pay-for-performance provisions. Sick leave would be reduced from three weeks a year to two and vacation leave capped to five weeks a year;
- Give city, school, or township officials the power to unilaterally impose final contract offers if an impasse in negotiations is reached; and
- Bar employees of charter schools from collectively

bargaining.

Protests against these measures erupted in Ohio last spring with large demonstrations in the state capital of Columbus and other cities. These were part of growing opposition around the country that reached its highest point in Wisconsin.

At their high point, the Wisconsin protests against Republican Governor Scott Walker involved hundreds of thousands of workers and young people. The protests—the first eruption of mass working class opposition in decades—were not motivated only by the attack on collective bargaining rights. Thousands came out to oppose the assault on vitally needed social programs, social inequality and the domination of big business over the entire political system. These same concerns would have given rise, months later, to the anti-Wall Street protests.

Despite the overwhelming support for the Wisconsin protests, the mass movement was strangled and defeated by the trade unions and their pseudo-left supporters. These organizations promoted the Democratic Party, claiming that this pro-business organization was a stalwart defender of the working class against the right-wing attacks of the Republicans. As the confrontation with Walker escalated and sentiment grew for a general strike, the unions called off the protests and channeled opposition behind a campaign to recall Republican legislators and replace them with Democrats.

As in Wisconsin, the unions in Ohio—including the state affiliates of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) and the National Education Association (NEA)—do not oppose the demands that the working class pay for the economic crisis. The trade union managers only ask that they retain a “seat at the table” to impose these

demands, while they continue to finance their bloated salaries from the union dues deducted from workers' ever-dwindling paychecks.

In their campaign material for Tuesday's vote, a coalition of unions boasted, "Ohio's public employees have already sacrificed—saving Ohio taxpayers over \$350 million through concessions, including pay freezes and unpaid furlough days."

No doubt one of the chief concerns of the trade union apparatus is overturning a provision of SB 5 that lifts the requirement that workers pay a "fair share" fee if they decide not to join a union.

For their part, most Democratic Party politicians in Ohio and around the country are supporting the unions' efforts to boost their election fortunes in 2012. At the same time, they see the Republican drive to permanently cripple the unions as undermining a vital political instrument that has long been used to suppress the class struggle.

The Democratic Governors Association recently announced it was making a \$150,000 contribution to the union-led "We Are Ohio" coalition. A letter written to the AFL-CIO and Change to Win unions by DGA executive director Colm O'Comartun declared that the "repeal of SB 5 in Ohio is ground zero in the fight to protect the rights of workers." It continues, "Republican Governor John Kasich and his allies in Mitt Romney and Rick Perry may have waged war against organized labor, but rest assured that we stand firmly with you in this fight."

O'Comartun is an aide to Maryland's Democratic governor Martin O'Malley. O'Malley has viciously attacked the pensions and working conditions of public employees. He has reduced a \$1.6 billion budget deficit by freezing education funding and overturning a law that mandated annual increases to improve public schools.

During a mass protests by public employees in front of the state legislature in Annapolis last March, O'Malley was trundled out on the stage by AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka. Facing a hostile crowd, O'Malley said he was not like his Republican counterparts and would not "do away with collective bargaining."

According to a *Washington Post* account of the protest, "O'Malley then offered the near exact words Maryland State Education Association President Clara

B. Floyd said earlier in the evening that she wanted to hear. 'Look we have tough decisions ahead of us,' O'Malley said. 'But we are committed to staying at the table, and figuring this out together' with the unions, he said."

There is a widespread hostility to the right-wing corporate forces that have sought to turn private sector workers—who have faced savage wage and benefit cuts—against supposedly "overpaid" and "coddled" public employees.

A recent poll conducted by Public Policy Polling found that 59 percent of Ohio voters plan to reject Senate Bill 5, with only 36 percent voting for approval. Those voters identifying themselves as Democrats were almost unanimous in their opposition, supporting repeal by an 86-10 margin. Among those listed as Republicans, 30 percent are planning to vote down the proposal, and "independents" oppose it by a 54 to 39 spread.

The unions and the Democrats hope to use the repeal campaign as a model for the reelection campaign of President Obama in 2012. "If we're successful, it would be a clear repudiation of the signature piece of legislation in (Gov.) John Kasich's first year," said Ohio Democratic Chairman Chris Redfern. "That would take us like a slingshot into next year with a great deal of momentum and enthusiasm."

That is, the unions and the Democrats see the ballot initiative primarily as a measure to bolster support for a government that has spearheaded the attack on teachers and other public employees and is now collaborating with the Republicans to slash trillions more in social spending. This only underscores the fact that the "no" campaign led by these forces has nothing to do with defending the rights of the working class.

The fight against the attack on the rights of workers is only possible through a break with the corporatist unions and the independent organization and political mobilization of the working class against both big business parties.



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