

US off-year balloting shows mass opposition to right-wing policies

Patrick Martin
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The results of Tuesday's off-year elections and referendum votes scattered across the United States showed mass popular opposition to the right-wing agenda of the Republican Party, but little enthusiasm for the Democratic Party.

The most important result was the vote in the key industrial state of Ohio to repeal the anti-workers' rights measure, SB-5, enacted by the Republican-controlled state legislature and signed into law by Republican Governor John Kasich.

Public employee unions collected one million signatures to put the legislation on the ballot for a referendum vote, and the turnout was vastly larger than for any previous odd-year election, with no statewide or federal offices on the ballot.

Some 3.5 million people voted, nearly as many as the 3.9 million who voted in the 2010 congressional and gubernatorial elections. They voted by 63 percent to 36 percent to overturn SB-5, which stripped most state and local government workers of collective bargaining rights, imposed more severe penalties for strikes, and increased workers' contributions for health and pension benefits.

The number voting to repeal SB-5, 2.1 million, was more than the 1.9 million votes received by Kasich in his successful campaign for the governorship last year, when he ousted Democrat Ted Strickland.

Media analysts tried to downplay the political significance of the vote by pointing to a second statewide referendum in which 64 percent voted to support a measure that would exempt Ohio residents from any mandate to buy health insurance under the Obama health care law.

This vote was by no means as clear as the vote to repeal SB-5. While the Tea Party demagogic against the supposedly "socialist" character of the Obama health care plan has caused confusion, the opposition is fueled as well by its impact on the living standards of working people.

Both big business parties are attacking the working class. The Republican anti-workers' rights law would devastate the living standards of public service workers, strip them of democratic rights and criminalize collective resistance to attacks on their jobs and living standards.

The health care law passed by the Democrats in 2010 also contains reactionary provisions, particularly the so-called "individual mandate," which will force many young, low-paid

workers to buy inadequate, stripped-down policies they cannot afford and do not want. The health care bill does not establish a social right to health care. It instead establishes the "right" of giant health insurance corporations to collect tribute from the entire American population.

The defeat of SB-5 is being widely presented in the media as a vindication of the unions and a sign of their resurgence. It is nothing of the kind, and workers should not succumb to the notion that the unions are either willing or able to defend their interests.

The unions did not oppose SB-5 in order to defend the democratic rights of workers to collectively bargain or strike, or to defend the health benefits and pensions of state employees. They have collaborated in the imposition of massive cuts and are prepared to collaborate in even bigger ones going forward.

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."

The concern of the trade union apparatus was to protect its institutional interests, above all the flow of dues that sustains the bloated salaries and perks of union officials. In particular, the unions were focused on a provision in SB-5 ending the requirement that workers who decide not to join a union pay a "fair share" fee to the union.

As during the struggle in Wisconsin earlier this year, the union officials are quite prepared to sacrifice the incomes of workers, but only bestir themselves when the fight concerns a diminution of their own funds.

The practical effect of the repeal of the anti-union law may be limited. While Governor Kasich claimed he would respect the result, he warned that the state government would not help cities, counties and school districts that had factored the cuts in labor costs into their budgets and now find themselves with unexpected deficits.

Republican legislators indicated they would introduce many of the most onerous elements of SB-5, like the big increase in pension and health coverage charges for state workers, as separate pieces of legislation.

Union officials hailed the outcome of the Ohio vote on SB-5, which they aim to use to build support for the Obama reelection

campaign in 2012. Lee Saunders, secretary-treasurer of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, one of the two main unions of state government workers, said the unions expected to use Ohio “as a springboard to continue into 2012.”

Three other significant votes dealt blows to the ultra-right:

? The defeat in Mississippi of a proposed amendment to the state constitution that would define a fetus or fertilized human egg as a legal person.

? The recall of Arizona state senate president Russell Pearce, a Republican who was identified with anti-immigrant legislation such as the notorious SB 1070.

? The repeal of a state law in Maine that restricted voting rights by abolishing same-day registration on Election Day.

The Mississippi vote drew the most attention and was perhaps the most surprising to the state’s political establishment in both parties. Both the Republican and Democratic candidates for governor endorsed Initiative 26, the so-called “personhood” amendment, but it was heavily defeated, with 58 percent voting against it.

The Republican candidate, lieutenant governor Phil Bryant, declared that “Satan wins” if the amendment was defeated, and called the referendum vote “a battle of good and evil of Biblical proportions.”

Bryant won the gubernatorial race and another right-wing referendum, imposing stricter voter ID requirements, passed as well in Mississippi.

Besides abortion rights groups, the main opposition to the “personhood” amendment came from medical doctors who warned that the measure would effectively criminalize birth control and call into question such procedures as in vitro fertilization, which frequently leads to the destruction of unused fertilized eggs.

Anti-abortion groups introduced the amendment in a southern state known for its poverty and religious backwardness after failing to get a similar measure passed in Colorado in 2008 and 2010. The exact text of the initiative read: “Should the term ‘person’ be defined to include every human being from the moment of fertilization, cloning or the equivalent thereof?”

The recall of Pearce in Arizona was a public repudiation of the extreme chauvinist elements that dominate the state’s Republican Party. The recall petition was organized by union officials, Latino organizations and Phoenix-area Democrats, who collected 17,000 signatures to force a vote, but then supported a more moderate Republican, charter school administrator Jerry Lewis, who won 52 percent of the vote to Pearce’s 45 percent.

Lewis focused mainly on the impact of the bad national publicity on Arizona’s tourism business, saying that the anti-immigrant legislation made Arizona “look like Alabama in 1964” and was scaring away potential visitors.

In Maine, a right-wing Tea Party Republican, Paul LePage, won the governorship last year and the Republican Party took

control of the state legislature, enacting, among other reactionary measures, a law repealing the state’s tradition of same-day registration, which encourages voter turnout.

More than 70,000 people signed petitions to put the anti-democratic law on the ballot, and it was voted down Tuesday by a wide margin, 61 percent to 39 percent.

In another indication of anger in the working class, voters in a state legislative district south of Flint, Michigan recalled a Republican state legislator, Paul Scott, who spearheaded recent legislation attacking the pensions, benefits and union rights of public school teachers. The Michigan Education Association collected signatures to force the recall and there was heavy turnout in the mostly working class district. A special election will be held to fill out the remainder of Scott’s term.

While the rising social discontent found expression in the referendums and recalls, there was little impact on the two-party contests for statewide office, limited to a handful of states, and with right-wing candidates on the ballot for both parties.

Democratic Governor Steve Beshear won reelection in Kentucky, while Republican Phil Bryant won the contest in Mississippi to succeed Republican Haley Barbour, who was term-limited.

In the two other gubernatorial elections earlier in the fall, Democrats retained control in West Virginia while Republican Bobby Jindal won reelection in Louisiana.

The Democratic Party easily retained control of both houses of the state legislature in New Jersey, demonstrating the plunging popularity of Republican Governor Chris Christie. A Republican effort to win control of the Iowa state senate by capturing a vacant seat fell short, but Republican candidates appeared to have gained the two seats they needed for a working majority in the Virginia state senate.

Democratic mayors won reelection in Philadelphia, Houston and Baltimore, and Democrats retained control in San Francisco and took control of Suffolk County, New York, the state’s largest suburban government.



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