

Republican governor to sign “right to work” law in Indiana

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1 February 2012

As early as today, Indiana’s Republican governor, Mitch Daniels, is expected to sign into a law a bill that will ban union contracts that require workers to pay dues or a fee to the union. The bill will go to the governor after the Republican-controlled state legislature votes on its final passage.

Indiana is set to be the first state in the industrial Midwest to adopt a so-called “right to work” law and the first in the US since Oklahoma in 2001. Such laws are already in effect in 22 other states, mostly in the South and West, but Republican legislators are currently pushing them in Illinois, Michigan and other states.

Backed by right wing and corporate interests in Indiana and nationally, the new law is not simply aimed at undermining the financial resources of the trade union apparatus—and donations to the Democratic Party. Above all, it is an attack on the rights of workers to organize and defend their interests.

Like similar efforts led by Republican governors and legislators in Wisconsin and Ohio last year, the measure seeks to prevent any collective resistance by workers against the attack on jobs and living standards. It is part of an effort by the American ruling class to re-impose the conditions of industrial servitude that prevailed before the industrial unions were established in the mass struggles of the 1930s.

Republican legislators complained that the lack of such a law led Volkswagen to choose Tennessee instead of Indiana as the site of its new plant. Workers at the Chattanooga factory are paid \$12 an hour, the lowest wage of any auto assembly plant worker in America.

The passage of the law is an indictment of the trade unions, which were incapable of mounting any serious resistance, despite popular opposition to the measure. Instead the unions channeled opposition behind the Democratic Party.

The Indiana state House committee advanced the bill last week, one day after Democrats called off their three-day boycott of legislative sessions and allowed the bill to proceed. Indiana Democrats pulled a similar stunt last year, emulating their counterparts in Wisconsin who sought to dissipate the mass protests against Governor Scott Walker’s anti-worker law.

The Democrats, like the unions, are not opposed to wage cutting. On the contrary, they believe the destruction of working class living standards can be achieved more efficiently and with less opposition with the assistance of the unions rather than without them. For their part, the main concern of the trade unions is that the new law will allow many workers to opt out of paying the dues, which help the union officialdom maintain their upper middle class lifestyles.

A union-sponsored web site, “Bad for Indiana,” complained that the ban on union security clauses—which mandate that all workers covered by a collective bargaining agreement pay dues—was creating a “Right to Freeload” law. According to the logic of the trade union bureaucrats, workers must pay for the privilege of being “represented” by organizations that sell out their interests.

Further on the union web site complains that “Purposely enacting laws to lower wages and benefits for all workers in order to lure low-paying jobs to the state is not a sound economic plan for Indiana or any other state.”

But this is exactly what the trade unions are doing. In the name of making the corporations “more competitive” and “saving American jobs,” the United Auto Workers, the United Steelworkers and other unions have collaborated for decades in the systematic lowering of wages and benefits, along with the shutdown of whole sections of industry.

Once a stronghold of the unions, Gary and other steel mill towns in northern Indiana and automotive centers such as Indianapolis, Anderson, Muncie and Kokomo are plagued by mass unemployment and poverty. As a result, the unionization rate in Indiana has fallen to 8.9 percent, down from 12.1 percent as little as a decade ago. Nationally, only 11.8 percent of all workers—and 7.2 percent of private sector workers—belonged to unions last year, down from around 35 percent of private sector workers in the 1950s.

In an effort to shore up their sagging dues base, the UAW, USW and other unions have completely endorsed the Obama administration's strategy of "in-sourcing," i.e., imposing savage wage cuts on US workers in order to lure production back from China, Mexico and other low-wage countries.

In September 2010, for example, the UAW tried unsuccessfully to force 650 workers at GM's Indianapolis stamping plant to take a 50 percent wage cut in order to attract a new buyer for the factory.

Industrial giant Caterpillar is now threatening to shift production from its locomotive manufacturing plant in London, Ontario to Muncie, Indiana where wages are almost two-thirds lower. Meanwhile, the company has locked out 450 Canadian workers for resisting wage-cutting demands.

Mike Jones, a Delaware County (Muncie) council member and former official of UAW Local 499, recently told the *Muncie Star Press*, "I would not do anything locally to undermine the Canadian auto workers and what they're trying to do. If they can't reach an agreement and the work is leaving, I would just as soon it come here."

Indiana workers who oppose the right-to-work laws are legitimately concerned about defending their collective bargaining rights. The unions, however, have long ago abandoned that right in practice. The main opposition of the unions to the Indiana Republicans is that the new law will eliminate the automatic dues check-off system.

This issue has a history. In their initial formation in the 1930s and 1940s, the unions faced the problem of achieving stability in the face of the relentless hostility of the corporations to the struggle of workers. The closed shop and automatic dues check off system emerged as a means of preserving a certain organizational protection under capitalism and combating the union-busting of big business.

As the WSWs explained last year during the mass protests in Wisconsin, "There was an implicit danger in the dues check off system, however. Gone were the days when a shop steward would have to resolve a worker's grievance before the worker would part with his dues money. The

stabilization of the union structure and the steady flow of dues guaranteed by the employer tended to liberate the unions from accountability to their own membership and the control of the rank and file.

"At the same time, the establishment of dues check off was tied to an acceptance of the capitalist system itself. With the recognition of unions and the agreement of the employer to deduct a portion of workers' wages for dues came the expectation that the union would enforce the terms of the contract. The AFL-CIO unions rejected the path of political struggle through the formation of an independent labor party, let alone the revolutionary overthrow of capitalism. They relied instead on the government to sanction and institutionalize their relationship with the employers."

After decades of class collaboration and degeneration, the unions have long severed any connections with the interests of the working class. Instead they have been transformed into organizations that are thoroughly hostile to those interests.

The Socialist Equality Party, however, is not indifferent, nor should workers be, as to how the influence and authority of the unions over the working class is broken. This task cannot be outsourced to right wing and pro-corporate forces that want to strip workers of any means of collectively defending themselves.

The SEP calls on workers to build an alternative to the class collaborationist and nationalist trade unions through the formation of rank-and-file committees in every factory and workplace. These organizations, controlled democratically by workers themselves, must spearhead a fight to unite the working class in a coordinated industrial and political struggle against the corporate and government attack on jobs, living standards and workplace rights.

The fight for rank-and-file committees is an integral part of the strategy of the SEP to develop a socialist political movement of the working class.



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