Democrats run right-wing campaign in Wisconsin recall election

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After running a campaign in which he has hardly mentioned the issues that provoked mass protests last year, Democratic candidate Tom Barrett appears likely to lose recall elections scheduled for June 5.

With less than a week to go before the recall election in Wisconsin, national Democratic Party officials and the Obama administration have effectively conceded the contest to Republican governor Scott Walker. While the outcome remains uncertain, Walker holds a slight lead in the polls, and groups funded by right-wing billionaires have outspent Walker's opponents by 25-1, flooding the state media with pro-Walker advertising.

The Democratic National Committee has not provided any funds to support the campaign of Milwaukee Mayor Barrett, the Democrat opposing Walker in the election, ignoring several appeals from state party officials. There are no plans for President Obama to visit the state or to campaign with the Democratic candidate, despite lip service from the White House last year to the movement against the anti-worker laws that sparked the recall campaign.

By the filing deadline of late April, Barrett had raised a total of $831,000, while Walker had a war chest of $25 million, with $20 million already spent in an unprecedented campaign that has saturated the airwaves in Wisconsin for months. Among Walker's donors are the ultra-right billionaire Koch brothers, casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson (the main backer of Newt Gingrich's failed presidential campaign) and the superPAC fundraising committee run by former Bush aide Karl Rove.

The likely reelection of Walker, widely hated by Wisconsin workers, is an object lesson in the reactionary and bankrupt character of the unions and their alliance with the Democratic Party. Hundreds of thousands of workers took part in mass protests last year against the legislation pushed through by Walker to slash benefits, living standards and collective bargaining rights.

Union leaders embraced a series of recall petition drives aimed at diverting this mass movement away from demands for a general strike and into election campaigns to replace Republican state senators, and then the Republican governor, with Democrats. From the beginning, the Democrats and union officials insisted that they supported budget cuts, only seeking to preserve the role of the unions in enforcing them.

One million people signed petitions to force the recall election. Yet, within the framework of the two-party system, the only alternative to Walker is an equally right-wing big business politician, Barrett, who has sought to avoid any direct confrontation with Walker on the anti-worker laws.

At a debate last Thursday, the first of two during the month-long campaign, Barrett barely mentioned the laws passed last year by the Republican-controlled state legislature at Walker's behest.

As politico.com noted, "The issue of worker's rights—which initially sparked last fall's movement that resulted in the collection of nearly 1 million signatures—was almost a secondary issue in the debate. During the single exchange on the topic, even Barrett framed the fight over collective bargaining in larger terms. 'It's not just about public employees, it's about the middle class. I think it's an attack on the middle class,' he said, later noting in a separate answer that he was not labor's first choice to take on Walker."

Walker claimed that his Democratic opponent "wants to go back and completely restore collective bargaining," although there is no reason to believe this is true. As mayor of Milwaukee, Barrett has actually

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made use of the Walker law to cut benefits for city workers, extracting millions of dollars in concessions from workers whose unions are now telling them that a vote for Barrett over Walker is critical to defending their rights.

The only right that concerns the union officials is their "right" to keep collecting dues from union members, to share control of lucrative pension and benefit funds, and to have a place at the table when state and local government officials devise plans to slash the benefits, wages and jobs of the workers.

In the course of the 2011 struggles in Wisconsin, the unions embraced the cuts, while focusing their opposition on those provisions that affect the privileged position of the union officials. This year they have endorsed a Democrat whose main difference with Walker is that he wants to use the collaboration of the unions against the working class, rather than carrying out such attacks unilaterally.

The Wisconsin union officials are still actively engaged in the recall effort because Walker's hard-line stance threatens their position as a secondary layer of management in controlling state employees. At the national level, however, the unions have largely moved on, preferring to pour hundreds of millions of dollars into Obama's reelection and the campaign to elect Democrats to the House and Senate.

Earlier this month, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said in a television interview that even the reelection of Walker would amount to a "moral victory," because the Republican had been forced into the recall vote and "would be a debilitated governor for the next two years in office." The statement demonstrates that the AFL-CIO all along regarded the recall campaign as a means of preventing the escalation of the conflict in Wisconsin into a full-scale class confrontation that would have brought workers into conflict with both the unions and the Democratic Party.

As for Obama, the president's decision not to come to Wisconsin or publicly campaign against the Republican governor amounts to backhanded support for Walker. As with Barrett, Obama's main difference with Walker is that Obama would prefer to rely on the trade unions to help police the working class and suppress opposition to budget cuts and the destruction of jobs and living standards.

Democratic National Committee Chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz dismissed the June 5 recall as a contest with no implications for national politics. "It's an election that's based in Wisconsin," she said.

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