

The lessons of Wisconsin

Patrick Martin
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The rout of the Democratic Party and the unions in Tuesday's Wisconsin recall election has provoked a predictable response across the official political spectrum, from crude triumphalism on the extreme right to self-justification and hand-wringing among the liberal and pseudo-left apologists for the Obama administration.

The *Wall Street Journal* trumpeted the victory of Republican Governor Scott Walker, calling it the defeat of "a furious and well-fed special interest that wants a permanent, monopoly claim on taxpayer wallets."

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka blamed "Texas billionaires" and "multinational corporations" that backed Walker financially. Expressing the cynicism and complacency of the union officialdom, Trumka said there would be no change in his political strategy.

Completely absent in any quarter of official politics was a serious analysis of the origins of the June 5 debacle. It was, in fact, the predictable culmination of the intervention by the unions and the Democratic Party to suppress mass workers' protests and strikes that erupted in Wisconsin last year against the anti-worker, budget-cutting legislation pushed through by Walker.

The events of February-March 2011 were a critical political experience of the American working class and captured the attention of workers internationally. In response to Walker's surprise introduction of a measure to virtually eliminate bargaining rights for public employees and slash billions from workers' benefits and social programs such as BadgerCare (Medicaid), tens of thousands of workers took part in demonstrations and an occupation of the Capitol rotunda in Madison.

After the Republican-controlled state legislature ignored the protests and passed the anti-worker legislation, there was a growing movement for a general strike. The South Central Federation of Labor in Madison passed a resolution in favor of a general strike, not with any intention of carrying it out but as a sop to the growing militancy of the rank-and-file. The Socialist Equality Party and the *World Socialist Web Site* took up an aggressive campaign for general strike action, issuing

statements and distributing them in the thousands at anti-Walker rallies.

The leaders of the major unions—the AFL-CIO, the state workers union (AFSCME), and the teachers union (WEAC)—adamantly opposed any wider struggle against the anti-worker law. They offered to implement all the cuts demanded by Walker, provided he maintained the automatic dues check-off, the source of their own salaries, and preserved a role for them in negotiating the reductions in the income and benefits of their members.

The union leaders shut down the anti-Walker movement and diverted it into a series of recall campaigns aimed at replacing Republican politicians with Democrats, beginning with the recall of state senators during the summer and culminating in the petition drive that gathered nearly a million signatures and forced the June 5 recall election.

For their part, the Democrats stressed their support for Walker's attacks on public workers' benefits and social services, opposing only the measures aimed at undermining the position of the trade union bureaucracy, which remains a significant part of the Democrats' base of support.

As the WSWs explained at the time, the recall campaign was a cynical and reactionary maneuver aimed at demobilizing the working class, dissipating the opposition to the attacks on social programs and workers' rights, and channeling the struggle against Walker into support for the Democratic Party. The Socialist Equality Party campaigned for the removal of Walker through a general strike as the first step in an independent mobilization of the working class in political struggle against the profit system and both big business parties.

We wrote: "The call for Walker's removal does not imply a vote of confidence in the Democratic Party. Beyond the borders of Wisconsin there are Democratic Party governors and mayors who are calling for budget cuts no less draconian than those sought by Walker. The Obama administration is collaborating with the state governors and the Congress in Washington in the

implementation of budget cuts that will wreak havoc on the lives of workers throughout the country...

Thus, the demand for Walker's removal raises the most important issue of all—the necessity for workers to create their own, independent, socialist alternative to the corporate-controlled Republican and Democratic parties.” (See: “Walker must go! For a general strike in Wisconsin!”)

This perspective has been entirely vindicated by the events of the past 15 months. None of the candidates who sought the Democratic nomination to oppose Walker in the recall election was committed to the repeal of the anti-worker law or the accompanying budget cuts. The eventual Democratic nominee, Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, boasted that he was not the choice of the unions and virtually dropped the collective bargaining issue. He himself had made use of the Walker law to impose \$19 million in cuts on Milwaukee city workers.

The Obama administration made little effort to disguise its hostility to the recall campaign. Obama did not campaign with Barrett, and afterwards White House spokesman Jay Carney dismissed the significance of the vote, saying, “What you had was an incumbent governor in a repeat election that he had won once, in which he outspent his challenger by a magnitude of 7 or 8 to 1...”

The outcome of the recall vote is already being cited in the media and by leading Democrats as supposed proof that the public supports the kind of vicious austerity measures imposed by Walker. Thus the recall becomes the means to justify a further turn to the right on the part of the Democratic Party and the US political system as a whole, regardless of who wins the November 6 presidential election.

Pseudo-left groups like the International Socialist Organization (ISO) played a key role in torpedoing the struggle in Wisconsin, building up the authority of the unions and advancing a perspective that mass protest could force the Democratic Party to oppose the anti-worker policies of the Republicans. They deliberately concealed the class identity of the Democratic Party, which, no less than the Republicans, is a party of corporate America.

In the wake of the Democratic Party defeat, the ISO continues the cover-up, describing the victory of Walker as “a painful loss for the movement that emerged from the uprising.” This accepts the claim of union leaders that the recall campaign was the continuation of the mass movement against Walker, although it actually represented its betrayal and termination.

The events in Wisconsin in February-March 2011 coincided with an international upsurge of the working class, including the ouster of the pro-US dictators in Tunisia and Egypt and continuing with the mass protests against austerity in Spain, Greece, Portugal, Italy and even Israel.

The economic convulsions and social tensions that produced the upheaval in Wisconsin have not been resolved. On the contrary, they have intensified enormously. The working class in the United States and throughout the world is being driven into struggle by the crisis of capitalism and by the determination of the ruling class to defend its wealth through a ruthless attack on jobs, wages, education, health care and basic democratic rights.

This struggle requires a new political perspective and new organizations of struggle. No confidence can be placed in the trade unions, which serve as the policemen for big business inside the working class. The working class must build new organizations independent of the trade unions—rank and file committees to unite public sector and private sector workers as well as youth in the workplaces, schools and neighborhoods.

The militant defense of jobs, living standards and social services must become a political struggle against the profit system and the two corporate-controlled parties that defend it. The working class can take a step forward only when workers break with the Democratic Party and take up the fight to build an independent party based on a struggle for workers' power and socialism.

The central lesson of Wisconsin is the need to build a new leadership in the working class—the Socialist Equality Party—to arm the coming social struggles with a revolutionary program and perspective.

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