

UAW skulduggery in Michigan Proposal 2

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In the name of defending collective bargaining rights, the United Auto Workers (UAW) and the AFL-CIO are promoting a ballot initiative in the November 6 election that would add language to the Michigan Constitution explicitly acknowledging the right of the state and localities to restrict or ban strikes by public employees.

The initiative also bars the state and local governments from interfering with the flow of membership dues to the union bureaucracy.

The so-called “Michigan Protect Our Jobs Amendment,” which appears on the statewide ballot as Proposal 2, is an act of political skulduggery by the UAW and the AFL-CIO. The only concern of the union officials is to put in place a legally binding defense of their dues income, to be secured by assisting the state in stripping workers of the right to strike and fight collectively in defense of their interests.

The official ballot text states that Proposal 2 would amend the state Constitution to: “Invalidate existing or future state or local laws that limit the ability to join unions and bargain collectively, and to negotiate and enforce collective bargaining agreements, *including employees’ financial support of their labor unions. Laws may be enacted to prohibit public employees from striking.*” (Emphasis added)

This attempt to add language to the state Constitution supporting the right of state and local officials to ban strikes in and of itself defines Proposal 2 as a reactionary measure directed against the democratic rights of the working class. It is being cynically promoted by the unions and their allies (sponsors of the initiative include the Michigan Democratic Party) on false pretenses.

What is being presented as a defense of workers’ rights and jobs is, in reality, a defense of the institutional and financial interests of the trade union bureaucracy. And the price being offered up by the unions is the elementary right of workers to resist

attacks by the employers and the state by means of collective industrial action—by withholding their labor.

The Socialist Equality Party as a matter of socialist principle opposes any measures that undermine the right of workers to organize and fight in defense of their interests. So-called collective bargaining based on an acceptance of strike bans is a formula for collective surrender.

What the union leadership calls “collective bargaining” has always been an institutional setup designed to contain the class struggle in the US. For more than 30 years, this has been naked, with so-called collective bargaining producing endless cuts in wages and benefits, mass layoffs, and ever more brutal working conditions.

The UAW and AFL-CIO have long been hostile to strikes, concentrating all their efforts on suppressing the class struggle. UAW President Bob King and the union readily agreed to a six-year ban on strikes at Chrysler and General Motors as part of the wage-cutting bailout organized in 2009 by the Obama administration. Aside from a two-day strike and seven-hour strike in 2007 against GM and Chrysler, respectively, the UAW has not called a national strike against a US auto maker since 1976.

Our opposition to Proposal 2 has nothing in common with that of right-wing forces—including Michigan Governor Rick Snyder, the Republican Party, the Tea Party, the corporate-controlled media and conservative think tanks—that are opposing the ballot initiative.

They represent a section of the ruling class that seeks to bypass the unions and rejects their services in carrying out attacks on the living standards of the working class. By weakening the unions, they also seek to weaken the Democratic Party, which depends organizationally on the union apparatus for campaign funds, canvassers and votes, and politically on the bogus “left” and “pro-labor” cover provided by the

unions for the Democrats' own reactionary, anti-working class policies.

The Socialist Equality Party fights for the independent interests of the working class. We reject the notion that just because the Republican right opposes something, we are obliged to support it. working class politics do not consist in putting a plus sign where the most right-wing sections of the ruling elite put a minus. That type of politics—the bread and butter of middle-class pseudo-left organizations—leads to support for Obama and the Democrats. The working class has its own interests that it must defend in opposition to all sections of the ruling class.

The background to Proposal 2 is the antiunion offensive carried out last year by Scott Walker, the Republican governor of Wisconsin, and similar Republican-led campaigns in Ohio and Indiana. Walker and the Republican-controlled state legislature passed laws ending the dues check-off for public employees and requiring yearly elections to maintain union certification.

This was part of a sweeping attack on public workers' health care and pension benefits and severe cuts in social programs, including education. When a protest called by the unions exploded into a mass movement of rallies, marches and walkouts by teachers and students, the AFL-CIO and the teachers union worked feverishly to contain the movement and render it harmless by channeling it behind the Democratic Party. Meanwhile, both the unions and the Democrats proclaimed their acceptance of Walker's cuts, objecting only to his attacks on the unions' dues income and certification.

Republican governors and state legislatures in Ohio and Indiana followed Walker's lead. Last February, Indiana became the first Midwestern state to pass a so-called "right to work" law, ending the requirement that workers at locations covered by labor contracts pay union dues.

Republican state legislators announced their intention to press for a right-to-work law in Michigan. Proposal 2, which was launched last March by King, was a preemptive move to defend the ability of the union apparatus to collect dues from a captive workforce via the dues check-off, i.e., the automatic deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks.

Proposal 2 is directed not only against moves by right-

wing governors, but also against challenges to the union establishment from below. Bob King and company are far more concerned with the danger of a rebellion by rank-and-file workers than they are with attacks by Republican politicians.

Their entire position—financial, political, social—is based on the suppression of the class struggle and their collusion in wage cutting and layoffs. Proposal 2 embodies the anti-working class character of the organizations they lead. The unions are today—not only in the US, but internationally—direct participants and shareholders in the process of capitalist exploitation of the working class. As recent events in South Africa have shown, should they face a challenge by the workers, they will stop at nothing, including deadly violence, to crush it.

This applies to the UAW and the AFL-CIO no less than the National Union of Mineworkers and the Congress of South African Trade Unions. After all, the American trade union bureaucracy consolidated its control over the working class by means of violence and thuggery against socialists and militants, often in alliance with the Mafia.

Workers should proceed from the standpoint that they have an absolute right to organize and collectively struggle in defense of their interests. But, as the dishonest and cynical campaign for Proposal 2 underscores, that right can be defended only by carrying out a rebellion against the official unions, building new and genuinely democratic organs of working class struggle, and rejecting the pro-capitalist and pro-Democratic Party political perspective that has transformed the unions into agencies of the corporations and the state.



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