

Michigan voters reject union-backed constitutional amendment

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19 November 2012

On Election Day November 6, Michigan voters overwhelmingly rejected Proposal 2, a union-backed constitutional initiative promoted as a measure to defend collective bargaining rights.

Conceived in the wake of “right-to-work” initiatives in several Midwest US states, the so-called “Michigan Protect Our Jobs Amendment” was promoted by the United Auto Workers (UAW) union, the Michigan Federation of Teachers and the Michigan AFL-CIO. The measure was defeated 57 percent (2.62 million votes) to 43 percent (1.94 million votes) in the state that was the birthplace of industrial trade unionism.

The bill upheld the right to collective bargaining, but simultaneously affirmed the legality of laws restricting or banning public workers from striking. The proposal, if passed, would have strengthened such prohibitions by enshrining their legality into the Michigan constitution. As the WSWS characterized it, warning prior to the vote, “So-called collective bargaining based on an acceptance of strike bans is a formula for collective surrender.” (See, “UAW skullduggery in Michigan Proposal 2”)

Additionally, the amendment would have invalidated any existing or future laws that can limit “employees’ financial support of their labor unions”, in other words, that might infringe on the ability of unions to collect dues.

The Michigan unions spent approximately \$21 million in promoting and advertising leading up to the ballot. The amendment’s defeat was considered a debacle and an expression of the substantial loss of union credibility in the eyes of Michigan workers.

Union officials were stunned by both the defeat and its magnitude. Before the elections the UAW and other unions had told their members not to believe their waning numbers in the polls. However, Proposal 2 lost

in every Michigan county with the exception of Wayne County (60-40 percent), which includes Detroit, and Genesee County (54-46 percent), which includes Flint.

Karla Swift, president of the Michigan AFL-CIO, tried to downplay the significance of the vote, stating, “Proposal 2 lost because the other side outspent us overall by at least \$8 million, and over two-to-one in the final two weeks.” However, records show record spending on both sides, with opponents of the measure devoting about \$26 million.

Equally disingenuously, Bob King, president of the UAW, said he bore responsibility for the failure of the amendment and claimed it was misunderstood. “It’s not about right-to-work and we didn’t get our message out that this is clearly about protecting workers’ rights,” he told the *Detroit News*.

“The intent of the constitutional amendment was to stop the legislature’s (Michigan) overreach over the past months,” King told the *New York Times*. He pointed to the Republican-dominated legislature’s barring of negotiations on several union issues including the evaluation of teachers.

The fight over the amendment was watched carefully throughout the country. Proposal 2 was presented by union officials as “ground zero” in the fight to reverse the right-to-work offensive begun by Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker. After Ohio and Indiana legislatures embraced similar measures, and Indiana became the first right-to-work state in the Midwest, the Michigan Proposal took shape.

So-called “right-to-work” laws exist in 23 states in the US, primarily in the South. States with right-to-work laws have eliminated the requirement that workers at locations covered by labor contracts join the union and pay union dues.

The right-to-work offensive has been accompanied by vicious attacks on unionized workers throughout the US and Michigan. This has included mass layoffs, the growth of nonunion charter schools, attacks on tenure and seniority among public service workers and the dictatorial powers to abrogate contracts used by Emergency Managers (EM), which have been used against firefighters, municipal workers and teachers.

Yet workers were deeply skeptical of the bureaucracy's initiative. It is widely recognized that the unions have not lifted a finger to oppose any of the devastating attacks on jobs or wages. In fact, just as the unions have cooperated with *every* attack on Michigan workers—from sabotaging the strike of the Detroit Sewerage workers to abandoning the Pontiac firefighters to the dictates of an EM—it was suspected that the union proposal had nothing to do with defending the rights of workers.

So while the labor bureaucrats may be stunned by the scale and size of their miscalculation, the vote aptly expresses the continued loss of confidence of Michigan workers in the unions. Thirty years of concessionary contracts, the acceptance of two- and three-tiered wages and the unions' refusal to defend even the most elementary rights of workers has not gone unnoticed.



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