

For an independent political struggle by the working class

No to Michigan's 'right-to-work' legislation

Socialist Equality Party
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The Socialist Equality Party opposes the “right-to-work” legislation being rushed through the Michigan legislature by Governor Rick Snyder and state Republicans. Despite its misleading name, the measure has nothing to do with guaranteeing jobs or any other right to workers. On the contrary, it is aimed at stripping workers of any means of collectively defending their jobs, living standards and working conditions.

Funded by the most right-wing and anti-working class forces—including billionaire Richard DeVos and the Koch Brothers—the measure bans collective bargaining agreements that require workers to pay dues or fees to unions as a condition of employment. By instituting what is in effect an open shop requirement for all public and private-sector workplaces, the corporate backers of the legislation hope to remove any restrictions on their exploitation of labor.

States that currently have right-to-work laws, including Mississippi and South Carolina, are among the most impoverished in the United States. According to a study by the Economic Policy Institute, wages for both union and nonunion workers are on average \$1,500 a year lower in right-to-work states.

The reactionary character of the legislation is further underscored by the manner in which it is being pushed through. The measure is being voted on without any prior public debate or discussion and in a “lame duck” session of the state House and Senate before Republicans lose the votes needed to ensure passage. The police responded to a protest last Thursday with arrests and pepper spray.

The opposition by the Socialist Equality Party to right-to-work legislation, however, does not imply any support for the trade union bureaucrats or the organizations they control. These organizations have

long since abandoned the defense of working class interests and functioned as instruments of the employers and the government. The United Auto Workers, the Michigan Education Association and other unions oppose the Republican legislation—not because it strips workers of their rights, but because it threatens the dues income of the well-heeled executives who run the unions.

Based on the corporatist program of union-management partnership and American nationalism, the UAW and the other unions have spent decades imposing the demands of the corporations. Far from fighting plant closings, mass layoffs and wage-cutting, the unions have enforced them. These betrayals have led to a sharp decline in membership in Michigan, where the number of union members has plummeted from over one million in 1989—or 26 percent of the workforce—to 671,000, or 17.5 percent in 2011.

UAW President Bob King responded to the legislation by complaining that Snyder was attacking the very union that had helped Ford, GM and Chrysler make record profits. The UAW and other unions, he said, were not interested in any “confrontational, adversarial relationships” but only in helping the corporations and the state government.

That was demonstrated in the failed constitutional amendment—Proposal Two—that the UAW and other unions backed to try to preempt right-to-work legislation. In it, the unions explicitly sanctioned the banning of public-sector strikes by the government. After it was defeated, King and other union bureaucrats spent weeks promising Snyder they would work to suppress any resistance by workers to the governor's austerity measures if only he promised to veto right-to-work legislation.

There is no line the unions will not cross, no basic

right they will not abandon, to defend their relations with the employers and the government.

In addition to the unions, workers cannot place any confidence in the Democratic Party politicians who are posturing as friends of the working class. The Democrats, no less than the Republicans, defend the corporate and financial elite. Tactically, however, they believe the attack on workers' jobs and living standards can be carried out more efficiently and with less opposition if imposed with the collaboration of the unions, rather than without them.

That is what lies behind the Obama administration's tepid criticism of Michigan's right-to-work law. The president's press secretary particularly singled out the UAW for praise, knowing full well that the auto bosses could never have gotten away with slashing the jobs and wages of auto workers without the collusion of the UAW.

These betrayals—and the alienation workers feel towards the trade unions—have emboldened the Snyder administration to enact right-to-work legislation in a state with the fifth highest percentage of unionized workers in the US. Michigan was the scene of the great Flint sit-down strikes 75 years ago that spearheaded the formation of the mass industrial unions.

The Republicans also look to the example of Wisconsin, where the unions, working with the Democrats, sabotaged the mass movement against Governor Scott Walker that erupted in 2011, blocking demands for a general strike and diverting the protests into the dead end of a recall election.

The last thing the UAW and other unions want is another mass movement that could quickly get out of their control. The Michigan AFL-CIO and the UAW have not even hinted at calling a strike or taking any serious action. That is not surprising since the UAW agreed to Obama's ban on strikes in the auto restructuring and has basically outlawed any serious forms of struggle for decades.

Just as the gains won by workers in the 1930s required a break with the pro-business craft unions of the American Federation of Labor, the fight today requires the building of new organizations of mass struggle. A successful fight is possible only if workers wage it independently of the unions and the Democratic Party.

The SEP calls for the formation of rank-and-file

organizations in every workplace and neighborhood to organize the fight against this legislation and to defend the democratic and social rights of all workers. These rank-and-file committees must be democratically elected and committed to the independent industrial and political mobilization of the working class against the employers and big business politicians.

The experience of the last four years of the Obama administration—and the attacks carried out against teachers and other city workers by the Democratic Bing administration in Detroit—demonstrate the urgent necessity of the working class adopting a new political strategy. To defend its living standards and democratic rights, the working class must build a political party of its own to reorganize economic life in its own interests.

Genuine democracy is incompatible with a state of affairs in which a small and fabulously wealthy ruling elite monopolizes political and economic power. Only a mass independent political movement of the working class can wrest power from the financial aristocracy and reorganize society on an egalitarian basis. This means the fight for socialism. The factories, banks and utilities must be expropriated, taken out of the hands of the wealthy and placed under the ownership and democratic control of the working class. This will provide vast resources to deal with pressing economic and social issues, including the rebuilding of infrastructure, the expansion of public education and the guarantee of decent-paying jobs and a secure retirement for all workers.



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