

Michigan protesters denounce right-to-work law

A WSWS reporting team
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Several thousand workers marched on the state capitol building in Lansing, Michigan Tuesday to protest the passage of the right-to-work legislation Republican Governor Rick Snyder signed into law in the evening.

The mood at the rally was one of mixed anger and resignation, given the fact that the United Auto Workers and other unions have rejected any serious mobilization against the bill.

“Judging by the size of this protest, I assume the Republicans will pass this law,” said an electrician who participated in the demonstration Tuesday morning. “To suggest that we should have an adversarial relationship with management gets you dirty looks. I don’t go to union meetings because that is the attitude that prevails,” he said. “We’ve already given up so much, what more concessions do they want to wrench out of us?”

“The unions have marshals inside the capitol telling workers not to do anything—that you’ll get in trouble with the police. That’s a metaphor for the role they play in the factories—telling us not to do anything that could hurt management.”

The bulk of the workers who protested were unemployed building trades workers, teachers who took personal days off (leading to the closure of schools in the Detroit suburbs of Taylor and Warren), as well as some delegations of state employees, auto workers, health care workers and others.

The anger of workers was in sharp contrast to the complacency of officials from the United Auto Workers and the Michigan AFL-CIO, who were determined to prevent a repeat of the mass movement that erupted in Wisconsin in 2011.

Tom Brown, a retired pipefitter said, “This took me by surprise. The governor said he was not interested in right-to-work, and then he turned around and pushed it through. I started out in a UAW plant in 1968. I worked 31 years there and then worked another 14 years as a pipefitter. In the 45 years I’ve been in the labor movement, I’ve seen how the unions have gone down hill. There are only a minuscule number of workers in the unions now—less than 7 percent in the private sector. We fought for the eight-hour day and now that and everything has been taken away.”

Workers stopped to discuss political issues with members of the Socialist Equality Party who set up a literature table outside the state Capitol and distributed the SEP statement “For the independent political mobilization of the working class, No to Snyder’s ‘Right-to-work’ legislation!” Several workers also purchased the SEP pamphlet *Lessons of Wisconsin: The way forward in the fight against austerity*.

Jesse, a young Ford worker, said, “The workers in the plant say they are prepared to walk out against this no matter what the union leaders say. The unions have given up so much. I’m one of the tier-two new hires, making half the wages of the older workers. I’m working 10.7 hours a day and don’t have my weekends anymore.

“People are very angry. What will be the point of working, if you’re working for nothing.”

Sally, a younger unemployed worker, said she had come down to the demonstration with friends. “I am anti-corporation. I went to college for four years and am now \$40,000 in debt and can’t find a job. I was

planning on doing library science. Now they are closing the libraries and laying people off. I decided to shove that and try to get a job doing anything I can. But there is just nothing available at entry level that doesn't involve selling something.

“My grandfather worked at Ford and he knew some of the people who were injured in the union organizing battles of the 1930s. In the past the unions helped a lot. Now things have changed.”

Sally said she opposed the attacks on public education being carried out by the Obama administration in Washington under the Race to the Top program. “All my friends are teachers, and they are very politically active. No one talks about the cuts to education, but it is so obvious what is happening.”

A school board official from Ann Arbor said, “The right-to-work law is an abomination. Our school district was consolidated under the Washtenaw Intermediate School District. They consolidated the school bus system, and the drivers have gone two years without wage increases. They don't have a 40-hour week, and there is a high turnover. We supported Obama, but his Race to the Top is really a race to the bottom. Our district had to give up all kinds of concessions on charter schools, test-based teacher evaluations and other things to apply. We did that, and we still didn't get the money.”

Another auto worker said, “My wife is in the Dearborn plant, and she's working 11.7 hours a day. What happened to the eight-hour day our fathers fought for when they sat down in the Flint auto factories in 1937? The unions are cooperating with the companies no matter what they do to us. And the Democrats are working with the Republicans no matter what they do. We have the worst economy in decades, and the billionaires are doing better than ever.”

Ray, an employee at Oakland County Community College, said, “They're trying to starve us out. The Republicans and the Tea Party started all this talk about balancing the budget. Thirty years ago nobody cared. The corporations want to put us in our place. It's nothing but the corporations and profits. With globalization they are trying to turn us into a Third World country.”

A laid off electrician said, “This is insane how the

Republicans did this—in a lame duck session after Snyder said he was not in favor of this. He should be impeached and thrown in jail. All of the politicians are alike: after Clinton left office he was hanging out with Bush. Obama will do the same.”

A state worker added, “We've had ten years of cut after cut, ever since [Republican] Governor John Engler. Even under Granholm, the Democrat, we had to take furlough days and other concessions.”



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