

Michigan's right-to-work law

Jerry White
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Michigan's Republican Governor Rick Snyder on Tuesday signed into law a so-called "right-to-work" bill, making Michigan the 24th state in the US to adopt the measure. The law bars labor contracts requiring all workers to pay union dues as a condition of employment. Promoted by right-wing forces, its basic aim is to undermine the ability of workers to collectively fight in defense of their interests in opposition to the employers.

The inability of the United Auto Workers and other unions to mount any serious opposition to the legislation demonstrates the bankruptcy of these organizations. They long ago ceased to fight for the interests of their rank-and-file members or the working class as a whole.

The UAW, the Michigan AFL-CIO, the Michigan Education Association and the other unions are incapable of mobilizing workers. They have spent the last three decades working to suppress and betray workers' struggles and impose the demands of the corporations for one round of wage and benefit cuts after another. They have collaborated in the closure of plants and mass layoffs, leaving former industrial centers like Detroit devastated and impoverished. The UAW agreed to a six-year strike ban as part of the wage-cutting contract dictated by the Obama's Auto Task Force in 2009.

The UAW once had over 1 million members and as recently as 2004 had 650,000 on its membership rolls. Today it has a membership of about 380,000.

Workers do not look to these anti-democratic, sclerotic organizations, with their legions of six-figure-salaried officials and joint union-management slush funds, as instruments of struggle. They hold them in deserved contempt.

The executives who run the UAW and the other unions oppose the right-to-work law only because it threatens the flow of dues that sustains their

apparatuses. They couldn't care less about the rights of workers, and are no less hostile to the class struggle than those who pushed the bill through the legislature.

Where do the union dues go? To providing funds for the Democratic Party and the bureaucrats' own affluent lifestyles. Meanwhile, young workers in UAW plants are forced to work for poverty-level wages of \$15 an hour, endure back-breaking speedup, work ten- and even 12-hour days with no overtime pay, and watch as "their" union reps police the shop floor on behalf of the bosses.

With the new law not going into affect until April—and at workplaces only after the expiration of current agreements—the UAW bureaucrats at Solidarity House and officials at union headquarters all over the state will work overtime to push through new concessions contracts to lock in their dues income for the next several years.

Just one day before the passage of the right-to-work law, the UAW hosted President Obama at a Detroit-area factory and cheered his plans to slash and ultimately dismantle Medicare, Medicaid and Social Security. In his speech, Obama criticized the right-to-work law on the grounds that the UAW had demonstrated its usefulness by collaborating with the government and the auto companies in slashing wages and benefits and returning the US auto industry to profitability.

The collapse of the trade unions is the outcome of the reactionary political perspective upon which they were based. The UAW arose out of massive struggles in the 1930s, which began with a rebellion against the old labor organizations of the American Federation of Labor.

To establish the new industrial unions, workers had to carry out sit-down strikes and general strikes that paralyzed entire cities. They had to battle company thugs, police and the National Guard—and thousands

paid with their lives.

The great tragedy of this movement was that it remained under the control of a right-wing, pro-capitalist bureaucracy, which from the earliest stages worked to subordinate the newly organized unions to the corporations, the Democratic Party and American imperialism. In the 1940s, the socialists and left-wing militants who had led the sit-down strikes were purged from the UAW in the anti-communist witch hunts carried out by the union bureaucrats.

It did not take very long for these organizations to begin their decline, which coincided with the first signs in the 1950s and 1960s of the end of American postwar economic hegemony. By the 1970s and 1980s, the growing global integration of production and finance undercut the nationalist perspective on which they were based.

The unions had no answer to the domination of the world economy by giant corporations, which made it possible for the capitalists to exploit a global labor market and transfer production to low-wage countries. Their only response was to go from pressuring employers to improve the wages and conditions of workers to pressuring the workers to improve the competitiveness of the corporations by means of layoffs, wage cuts and speedup.

The unions repudiated any form of independent struggle and adopted the corporatist policy of union-management “partnership.” This went hand in hand with the promotion of economic nationalism to pit US workers against their class brothers around the world.

The result of this process is the transformation of the unions into labor syndicates. They have become businesses that seek a cut in the profits sweated out of the workers. The UAW is today a major holder of stock in the Big Three automakers. Its income is tied to driving up the profits and stock prices of the companies at the expense of the workers.

What conclusions must be drawn?

It is not a matter of reviving these corrupt and reactionary organizations, as proposed by the various pseudo-left allies of the union bureaucracy such as the International Socialist Organization.

New organizations, rank-and-file committees of struggle independent of the UAW and the other unions and based on an entirely new perspective, must be built. The guiding principle must be the unconditional

defense of the jobs, living standards and working conditions of all workers, not what the corporate bosses and their political mouthpieces say they can afford.

Such committees must fight for the full industrial and political mobilization of the working class. They must reject the “Buy American” nationalism of the unions and coordinate their struggles against the global corporations with workers throughout the world.

Most fundamentally, the working class needs a new political perspective and political party. Workers are confronting not just this or that rapacious boss, but an entire economic system in the US and internationally—the capitalist profit system—which, in order to satisfy the needs of the ruling elite, requires the spread of social misery, poverty, war and the most brutal forms of exploitation.

The issue is not fighting for better terms of exploitation, but ending the system that is based on exploitation. In opposition to the two parties of big business, the working class must build its own mass party to fight for the socialist reorganization of economic life on the basis of human need, not the accumulation of private wealth. We urge workers to join and build the Socialist Equality Party as the new, revolutionary leadership of the working class.

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