Michigan unions ram through concession deals ahead of right-to-work law

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Public employee unions throughout Michigan have rushed through long-term contracts that secure their dues base before the right-to-work law takes effect on March 28. Local unions at school districts, universities, and municipalities have offered up deep concessions in order to arrive at deals in the past few weeks. At least 40 school districts have agreed to new contracts since December.

Michigan became the 24th state to impose right-to-work statutes in December when Republican Governor Rick Snyder signed it into law. Promoted by right-wing forces, the intent of the law is to undermine the ability of workers to collectively resist attacks by employers on their wages and working conditions.

After decades of betrayed struggles and labor-management collaboration in the destruction of workers' jobs and living standards, the United Auto Workers and other unions were incapable of rallying any significant opposition to the bill.

What most concerns the union bureaucracy is that the elimination of "security clauses"—which require all employees at unionized shops to pay dues or fees as a condition of employment. They are well aware large numbers of workers, deeply alienated from these pro-company organizations, will simply stop paying dues.

In response to the passage of the bill, unions such as the UAW, Michigan Education Association, and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) have worked single-mindedly to ensure their own survival, at the expense of their own memberships. Since the law only applies to new contracts, unions have hurriedly opened up their current agreements and modified them with years-long extensions.

In Washtenaw County, the Board of Commissioners quietly approved 10-year agreements with unions representing 700 employees on March 20. Employee pay has been cut several times since the onset of the economic crisis in 2008. The new contract contains further cost-savings for the county. Salaries will not be restored to 2007 levels until 2015.

Retiree health care and pension costs were the main targets for cuts. Unions agreed to scrap the defined benefit retirement plan for a defined contribution plan with 401(k) accounts for all future employees. For current employees, the county is implementing caps on its pension contributions to no more than 7.5 percent.

"We are able to eliminate substantive legacy costs for the organization," said Commissioner Conan Smith (Democrat, Ann Arbor). Commissioner Ronnie Peterson (Democrat, Ypsilanti) commented, "This has got to be one of the best contracts this county has ever negotiated. The greater loss, in terms of sacrifice, once again, comes from county employees."

"This means security for the next five years," AFSCME Local 3052 President Nancy Heine told the *Ann Arbor News*. Calling the attack on the pension system a "stumbling block," Heine said, "It's more important for us to have the stability. It helps us affect changes in Lansing for the next couple of years."

Heine's comments reveal with a remarkable transparency the mind of the local bureaucrat. "Stability" for the union—means the financial stability of the union executives—bought with the livelihoods and retirement benefits of workers. At the same time, the unions will spend millions for the election of a Democratic governor who would more likely use their services, and protect their income, to impose austerity.

On March 19, the Republican-controlled state House Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee drafted legislation tying state funding to concessions. Universities could lose up to 15 percent of state funding if new employee contracts do not yield more than 10 percent in cost savings. This is aimed at punishing institutions that have already signed long-term contracts with unions.

The University of Michigan, which has reached a tentative five-year contract with five different unions on campus, is threatened with a loss of $47.3 million. Wayne State University in Detroit, which approved an eight-year contract with faculty, could lose $27.5 million. This would reduce funding to a level not seen at the university since 1987.

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In fact, the deals imposed sweeping attacks on workers. The WSU contract includes higher health insurance co-pays and deductibles. The contract also includes annual raises of 1.25 percent—lower than the rate of inflation—but if the university sees funding cuts, it has the authority to "lower the raises unilaterally."

At the K-12 level, the unions have been even more generous in givebacks. The Detroit Federation of Teachers pushed through a concessions-laden contract on nearly 4,000 teachers in the state's largest school district. The proposed three-year deal will sanction and end to class size limits and force teachers to accept a continued pay freeze. Pay steps—i.e., raises according to seniority—will be curtailed. Teachers will receive "bonuses" only if there is an "improvement in the District's financial condition," in a city on the verge of bankruptcy.

Last month, the Taylor Federation of Teachers in the Detroit suburb secured a deal comprised of two separate contracts: one is a 10-year security clause ensuring the union dues base, and the other is a four-year contract dealing with terms and conditions for the employees. The TFT volunteered an immediate 10 percent pay cut for the district's 500 teachers. Superintendent Diane Allen praised the contract: "Such things as step increases, credit hours and mileage reimbursements have been frozen until the 2015-16 school year."

The Lansing Schools Education Association in the state capital's public school district agreed March 21 to a five-year contract that includes a wage freeze, the reduction of planning time, and the outright elimination of art, music, and physical education teachers.

Out of a staff of 915, 87 workers are expected to be fired. The Lansing school board approved the contract over the protestations of teachers, parents, and students. "Some people don't have money to buy paints or papers, and some teachers just don't have the time to teach music or art," said one student through tears. "People don't think about that sometimes."

Dearborn Public Schools likewise negotiated a five-year contract containing a pay freeze on teachers. "We will not be affected by Right to Work AND we will be able to continue having our union dues deducted through payroll until this contract expires," Dearborn Federation of Teachers President Christine Sipperley wrote in a letter to union members.

On Monday, the Grand Rapids Education Association reached a three-year agreement with the public school district that includes raises of between 2 and 4.3 percent. The district's teachers are the lowest paid in Kent County, according to the *Grand Rapids News*. Since 2002, the district has cut $79 million out of its budget. The newspaper noted that the new contract "included no limitation on class sizes."

Grand Rapids teachers, speaking to the paper after the ratification vote, expressed anger, worry, and the stress caused by the attack on public education.

"I'm worried about the young teachers, the new teachers in the district because they don't get any step increases at all," Carol Bronson, a music teacher with 18 years told the *Grand Rapids News*. "I'm not optimistic about the district at all. I'm hearing a lot of people saying they're ready to leave. Not just people who are retiring but young people, too.

"You just can't live your life not knowing what's going to happen," Bronson said. "Right now it's one out of five teachers who leave teaching within the first five years, but I think very soon it's going to be three or four out of five who leave. You can feel the tension and frustration in the buildings."

"I didn't have time to vote today because I had to get to the second job I had to take tutoring so we can survive," said Tina Ratliff, a young second grade teacher at Burton Elementary. "I love Burton, I love my kids, I love the families there and I love teaching. I was born to do this job but it's a scary, scary time not knowing what crazy thing the state or the district is going to do to take another $100 out of your paycheck.

"Honestly, I just want to get out because it scares me to think where we're going after this," Ratliff told the paper. "I just want to be able to survive."

Teachers and other public sector workers have been systematically impoverished over the past decade. For good reason, they place little confidence in the unions, who have sold them out time after time. With no-strike clauses written into their contracts, the unions have repeatedly taken up the cry of the political establishment that "there is no money" and collaborated in the destruction of decent wages, quality education, and basic social programs.

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