

Democrats turn further to the right in Wisconsin gubernatorial campaign

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The selection of former Trek Bike executive and multi-millionaire philanthropist Mary Burke as their gubernatorial candidate represents a further turn to the right by the Democratic Party.

Wisconsin's gubernatorial election in November will set the stage for further attacks on the working class. The Democratic Party has dropped any pretense of fighting to roll back massive cuts to social spending or to reverse the attacks on workers' rights carried out by Republican Governor Scott Walker.

The introduction in 2011 of Act 10 by Wisconsin's Republican legislature, which stripped public workers of nearly all collective bargaining rights and eliminated automatic dues check offs, sparked outrage amongst workers throughout the state. Workers and youth from throughout the state responded by occupying the state capitol building in Madison and holding mass rallies for several weeks, some days numbering more than 100,000.

Those on the pseudo-left, in particular Lee Sustar of the International Socialist Organization, argued that in the face of the massive February-March protests that the Democratic Party and their trade union lackeys had "little choice" but to stand up and fight the attacks on social programs and fundamental workers' rights. (See: "The International Socialist Organization gushes over unions' role in Wisconsin")

After the passage of the bill the Democrats worked with the unions to disperse workers anger into a futile recall campaign against Governor Walker and other state Republican officials. The pseudo-lefts promoted illusions in the attempted recall of Governor Walker in 2012, which ended in a rout of the Democrats, who ran Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, a candidate who openly boasted about enacting deep austerity measures on city workers by working with the trade unions.

The unionization rate amongst public employees in the state of Wisconsin has declined at historic rates since the passage of the bill. The share of public employees who were union members in 2013 was 36 percent, down from 50 percent in 2011.

With the 2014 gubernatorial election the Democrats are seeking to distance themselves as far as possible from the 2011 protests, and the deep opposition to austerity they reflected, by running former executive and multi-millionaire philanthropist Mary Burke for governor. Speaking to a joint meeting of the Rotary Club of Milwaukee and the Milwaukee Press Club in early May, Burke readily referred to herself as a fiscal conservative.

This is a confirmation of the analysis made by the *World Socialist Web Site* at the time of the protests and subsequent recall elections. In the aftermath of the 2012 recall we wrote: "The outcome of the recall vote is already being cited in the media and by leading Democrats as supposed proof that the public supports the kind of vicious austerity measures imposed by Walker. Thus the recall becomes the means to justify a further turn to the right on the part of the Democratic Party and the US political system as a whole..." (See: "The lessons of Wisconsin")

Burke has consistently dissembled when asked about her position on Act 10. Her response has been that, if elected, she would work to restore collective bargaining rights for public employees but that it was "only fair" to make cuts to public workers' health care and pension plans. Burke stated, in an interview with Milwaukee's "left" alternative paper the *Shepherd Express*, that deep cuts to public workers' benefits could have been negotiated "firmly and fairly."

Burke worked as an executive at Trek Bicycle, a company co-founded by her father Dick Burke, from

the late 1980s until 2004. Burke is a relative newcomer to the political scene; from 2005 to 2007 she served as Secretary of Commerce in the administration of Democratic governor Jim Doyle. Burke spent an unprecedented \$128,000 out of her own pocket, outspending her opponent more than 11 to 1, to gain a seat on the Madison School Board in 2012. She was criticized during that campaign by the executive director of Madison Teachers Incorporated (MTI), John Matthews, as a “1-percenter.” Despite his previous position, Matthews and MTI endorsed Burke for governor in April.

Burke is following the line which the Democratic Party put forward since the protests against Act 10 in 2011: deep cuts to wages, health care, pensions and other benefits could have been carried out in coordination with the unions. Walker recklessly provoked massive protests, according the Democrats, when he sought to break the public sector unions by eliminating automatic dues check offs and collective bargaining over all issues but wage increases tied to inflation. The Democrats argue that they could have enacted the same cuts as Walker and the Republicans by working hand in hand with the unions, enabling them to keep social tensions from exploding as they did in early 2011.

Burke’s opposition to overturning Act 10 has not stopped the unions from bestowing her with endorsements and opening their cash reserves. Phil Neuenfeldt, President of the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, praised her as “the best candidate to represent working people across Wisconsin.”

Speaking about the Wisconsin Education Association Council’s endorsement of Burke, President Betsy Kippers stated that, “With Mary Burke as a candidate, this race is winnable.” The state employees union (AFSCME), under the leadership of Marty Beil, has also committed its members and resources to Burke’s election campaign.

Burke has worked deliberately in her campaign to distance herself from the 2011 protests and the massive opposition to Walker’s attack on public sector workers’ rights. Her campaign website makes no mention of her position on Act 10, collective bargaining, or workers’ rights. Falling in line with Burke’s campaign, the unions have completely dropped overturning Act 10 as an issue in the

campaign.

The Democrats’ campaign is instead focusing on Scott Walker’s failure to create 250,000 jobs he promised in the 2010 campaign and the Republican Party’s attacks on women’s reproductive rights. In an interview with theDaily Beast Burke expounded on the core themes of her campaign, “It’s jobs, it’s women—I come at that not only as a business executive. I’m a problem solver. Where do you want to get to, where are you now? Let’s get all the options out on the table, and let’s choose the best one. I don’t care whether it’s Republican or Democratic. It’s not how I approach things.”

A Liberty Foundation of America poll from April 14-15 found that amongst likely voters Walker and Burke were tied at 47 percent with 4 percent yet undecided. It is expected that total spending on the gubernatorial campaign will outpace the \$81 million spent by both the Democrats and Republicans on the 2012 recall election, possibly breaking the \$100 million mark. In the first few months of the campaign Burke has already donated more than \$400,000 out of her own pocket.

The Democratic Party and the trade unions represent a historical dead-end for the working class. Workers in Wisconsin, the US and internationally must heed the lessons of the 2011 protests and subsequent recall elections. There is no shortage of opposition in the United States to the attacks on workers’ rights and austerity measures being carried out by the two parties of big business. If the working class is to defend its social rights, including the right to a job, high living standards, and social services, it must break decisively with the Democratic Party and take up the fight to build an independent party based on the struggle for workers’ power and socialism.

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