

Illinois governor race shows bipartisan lineup against workers

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This November, amid deep financial crisis and popular disgust with the two parties of big business, the people of Illinois are being asked to choose between Governor Pat Quinn, the Democratic incumbent who has championed austerity since taking office in 2009, and his Republican challenger Bruce Rauner, a representative of one of the most unattractive social types in America, the financial speculator.

The conditions in which the elections take place include high rates of unemployment, underemployment and poverty. Sixteen Illinois counties have unemployment rates of between 8.5 and 10.5 percent—well above the state average of 6.7 percent. These counties are located in former industrial areas, including the southern suburbs of Chicago, and the mining areas downstate, where far fewer low-paying service jobs in retail and hospitality exist.

The US Bureau of Labor Statistics reports the state's workforce participation rate is at a 35-year low in 2014, with 300,000 fewer workers employed than in 2008. As of 2012, about 2 million of the state's 12.8 million residents live below the federal poverty line. Thirty-eight percent of Illinois families are asset-impoverished, meaning they are one emergency away from poverty, according to the Corporation for Enterprise Development. Food-stamp enrollment in Illinois outpaces job creation by nearly 2-to-1, and the number of Illinoisans dependent on food stamps has risen by 745,000 in the recession era.

Working people do not believe that the elections will have any positive effect on these deteriorating conditions, a sentiment expressed in a record low 19 percent turnout in the March primaries.

The widespread disinterest and disillusionment with Democratic Party rule at the state and national levels has festered into anger in the years since President Obama has taken office, spurred on by unrelenting economic stagnation, austerity measures and the administration's renewed focus on expanding US-led war efforts in the

Middle East.

Since Obama himself is a product of the Illinois Democratic Party, the state is one of the few where he has been invited to campaign side-by-side with endangered Democratic officeholders. Barack and Michelle Obama both campaigned in Illinois on Quinn's behalf. In an address last week at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Business, Obama emphasized that his and Quinn's economic policies are one and the same, declaring they've been a great success.

Besides the dubious benefits of several Obama appearances, the Democrats are seeking to bolster their campaign with a cynical electoral ploy, placing a non-binding "advisory" question on the ballot in November on whether to raise the minimum wage from \$8.25 to \$10 per hour by January 1, 2015.

Since the Democrats control the state legislature and the governorship, they could have simply enacted the wage increase. Instead, Speaker of the House Michael Madigan, the state's most powerful Democrat, submitted the bill calling for the advisory question to be voted on in November, in a transparent effort to increase the turnout among low-income voters.

Democratic incumbent Governor Pat Quinn is a longtime local and state government official with little popular appeal, who became governor by accident. He had been picked for the position of lieutenant governor on the ticket headed by Rod Blagojevich, elected governor in 2006. After Blagojevich was impeached for attempting to sell the Senate seat formerly occupied by Obama, in 2009, Quinn became governor. He narrowly defeated the Republican challenger Bill Brady and was elected governor in his own right in 2010.

Since his election, Quinn enthusiastically promoted austerity in Illinois, signing legislation to cut critical healthcare services in the state and slash pensions in violation of state constitutional protections. On pension

reform, Quinn declared in 2012, “I know that I was put on earth to get this done.”

The cuts are estimated to cost tens of thousands of workers 20 percent of their pensions. A court challenge to the constitutionality of the cuts will be heard next month.

In 2012, Quinn backed bills to cut more than \$1 billion in state Medicaid funding, which provides health benefits to the poor, and restricted eligibility for the program on which three million in Illinois rely. In a particularly vicious episode, state and city Democratic leaders closed multiple public mental health facilities in Chicago, Rockford and Tinley Park, sparking protests. The disused Tinley Park facility has since been utilized by the US military for urban warfare training exercises.

Bruce Rauner, running on the Republican ticket, is a high-profile investor, the co-founder and former chairman of GTCR, a Chicago-based private equity firm. Rauner, who has reported making more than \$60 million in 2013, has been financially and politically active in education “reform” efforts, advising Chicago mayor Rahm Emanuel on education policy and financially supporting privatization lobby groups, including Stand for Children. During an October 9 public debate with Quinn, Rauner cited as models two other millionaire Republicans who have spearheaded budget cuts and attacks on workers, Michigan governor Rick Snyder and Florida governor Rick Scott.

The union bureaucracies in Illinois have endorsed the Democratic incumbent. Particularly significant are the endorsements of the two state teacher unions, the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the Illinois Education Association. In a calculated slap at public school teachers, Quinn chose as his running mate Paul Vallas, known for his efforts at promoting school privatization nationwide.

After serving as CEO of Chicago Public Schools, Vallas oversaw the expansion of charter schools in Philadelphia, beginning in 2002, and the complete charterization of schools in New Orleans, beginning in 2007, in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina. He was managing privatization in Bridgeport, Connecticut until June 2013, when his efforts were cut short by a court ruling that determined he lacked the credentials required to lead the district. Five months later, Quinn announced Vallas would be his running mate.

Rauner has funded the same “reform” lobby organizations, including Stand for Children, that Vallas worked with. So teachers are confronted with two tickets, Democrat and Republican, both led by their bitter enemies.

Nevertheless, Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis said, “I am proud CTU’s rank-and-file has made Governor Quinn their choice to lead Illinois. He is a consensus builder, will support public school educators and will continue his work to strengthen public education in Illinois and protect working families. Governor Quinn believes in public schools and I know he will fight to make sure every child has a great education.”

Like his Democratic counterparts in Chicago, Mayor Emanuel, and President Obama in the White House, Quinn has escalated the attack on teachers and public education. Quinn has, however, willingly sought out the assistance of the CTU and other unions in imposing these attacks.

In 2011, the CTU joined Illinois Democrats to pass a bill, SB 7, signed by Quinn, which stripped teachers of long-held rights and benefits and severely restricted their right to strike. This paved the way for the betrayal of the 2012 teachers strike by the CTU, which was followed by the closing of more than 50 schools in Chicago.

The SEIU and the Illinois firefighters union strongly endorsed Quinn in the spring. He also received an endorsement in September from AFSCME, whose members were hard hit by the Democratic governor’s pay and pension cuts.

While collaborating in these attacks, the unions’ overriding concern is maintaining good relations with the Democratic Party, which generally tries to keep the unions on board, protecting their legal status and the automatic deduction of union dues from workers’ paychecks.



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