

Governor, legislature move to pass right-to-work legislation in Wisconsin

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A spokeswoman for Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker announced Friday that he was prepared to sign so-called “right-to-work” legislation introduced by fellow Republicans in the state legislature. The bill would outlaw labor contracts that require workers to pay union dues or other fees as a condition of employment.

Republican Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald called for an Extraordinary Session on Friday allowing for the bill to be introduced in the State Senate yesterday and put to a vote as early as Wednesday.

After passage in the senate, the bill will then go to the state assembly, where the Republicans hold a significant majority, for approval next week. The legislative rules for an Extraordinary Session will make it harder for Democratic members of the senate and assembly to use extended public hearings and legislative debate as a delaying tactic.

Walker, a possible Republican candidate for President in 2016, had insisted during the 2014 gubernatorial election that he would not hesitate to sign right-to-work legislation into law if passed in the Republican-controlled state legislature. If, as expected, the legislation passes and Walker signs it into law, Wisconsin will become the 25th “right-to-work state.”

The introduction of right-to-work legislation comes immediately after Republican budget proposals in Wisconsin and Illinois that would cut hundreds of millions of dollars in funding from social programs and public universities.

Walker’s proposed 2015-2017 budget cuts \$300 million from the University of Wisconsin system, nearly \$100 million from primary and secondary public schools and \$15.6 million from SeniorCare, a state program for providing health care to elderly individuals who don’t qualify for Medicaid.

While AFL-CIO President Phil Neuenfeldt has denounced the budget proposal as “full of shortsighted and backwards priorities,” the union has done little to oppose the budget, promoting feeble protests and calling for the lobbying of Democrats and Republicans in the legislature.

The principal aim of Wisconsin’s right-to-work law, like others that have been passed throughout the US, is to undermine the ability of the working class to collectively organize and fight for its interests. It is backed by sections of the corporate and financial elite, generally associated with the Republican Party, which want to dispense with the unions as they intensify the assault on jobs, wages and social programs.

From the standpoint of the trade unions, however, the right-to-work laws are seen as a threat to their institutional interests and their role as a mechanism for suppressing working-class resistance. The Democratic Party in Wisconsin and other states has opposed such legislation because it sees the unions as a critical means of containing the class struggle and enforcing austerity measures.

Among workers, there is a widespread and entirely justified hatred of the unions—the result of decades in which the unions have collaborated with the corporations and the state in imposing cuts, layoffs and other attacks. When similar right-to-work laws were signed into law by Republican governors in the former industrial union strongholds of Michigan and Indiana in 2012, the trade unions and the Democratic Party proved incapable and unwilling to mobilize the working class to oppose the measures.

The Wisconsin AFL-CIO has called for union members to testify before the Senate Labor Committee and to attend protests at the capitol building on Tuesday and Wednesday. Such activities are designed to blow

off steam and dissipate opposition to the legislation. The union will work to keep any significant protests that emerge from getting out of their control as they did in 2011. The AFL-CIO has not called for any strikes in opposition to the legislation.

The current proposal from Walker comes four years after the governor pushed through a round of attacks on public education and the working class, coupled with a bill that removed collective bargaining rights for most public employees, known as Act 10.

Hundreds of thousands of workers and young people protested the reactionary Act 10 throughout the state in February and March of 2011 in mass demonstrations, job actions by teachers, walkouts by students, and the occupation of the capitol building. A call put out by the Socialist Equality Party for a general strike to bring down the Walker government and block the passage of the bill was taken up widely by protestors but rejected out of hand by the unions.

While workers indicated their hostility to the austerity measures included in the legislation, the unions insisted on their willingness to accept deep cuts to workers' wages and benefits. Their only real concern was maintaining their institutional interests, foremost among them the automatic dues check-off that fills their coffers.

Prior to the full implementation of Act 10, public sector unions hastened to sign contracts that included significant concessions but maintained the collection of dues as well as the union's role in managing public workers.

After the passage of Act 10, a futile recall campaign targeting Walker and a number of Republican legislators was launched by the trade unions, the Democratic Party and their pseudo-left affiliates. The campaign was designed to cover for the union's capitulation to Walker, disperse the protests and disorient workers, turning them back behind the Democrats.

Walker easily defeated Milwaukee Mayor Tom Barrett, a Democrat, in the 2012 gubernatorial recall election. As with other Democrats, including former Governor Jim Doyle, Barrett had boasted of imposing deep austerity on public workers with the aid of the trade unions. Walker won reelection in 2014 against multimillionaire Democrat Mary Burke, a former business executive, who boasted of being a "fiscal

conservative."

The unions fully back the attack on workers that is being carried out in various forms throughout the country by Democrats and Republicans. Across the border in Illinois, Democrats have supported unconstitutional attacks on state workers' pensions. To the east, in Michigan, Emergency Manager Kevyn Orr, a Democrat, oversaw the bankruptcy of Detroit, backed by the Obama administration. The unions have supported them in this campaign as they are politically tied to the Democratic Party and support unconditionally the capitalist system.

Opposition to the right-to-work law in no way implies support for the unions themselves. In fact, the defense of the democratic rights of the working class, and opposition to the assault on its jobs, wages and social programs, is possible only by breaking with these reactionary organizations and forming new organizations of struggle, pitted against both big-business parties and the capitalist profit system.



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