

West Virginia passes “right-to-work” law

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On February 12, West Virginia became the 26th state in the US to implement a “right-to-work” law prohibiting work contracts that require employees to pay union dues as a condition of their employment. Initially passed February 4, the Republican-controlled state legislature overrode Democratic Governor Earl Ray Tomlin’s veto to implement the “Workplace Freedom Act,” which will take effect on July 1.

The measure was part of a raft of right-wing laws introduced by the legislature in the midst of the state’s budget crisis, including the cutting of severance taxes for the coal and gas industries, drug testing for welfare recipients, work requirements for food assistance, the repeal of a requirement requiring that companies bidding on state projects guarantee workers a set minimum wage, and more.

The sharp dispute between Democrats and Republicans over right-to-work laws in West Virginia and across the US is not an issue of principle, but of tactics. Both parties are committed to austerity and further attacks on the working class. However, they have differences over the most efficient manner of accomplishing the goal of funneling even more money into the hands of the corporate and financial elite.

In the most immediate sense, the Republicans are promoting right-to-work laws in order to undermine the Democratic Party by reducing the influence of the unions, which provide critical financial support to the Democrats. The particular corporate and political forces promoting these laws want to further marginalize the unions or eliminate them outright. They are exploiting the widespread disgust with these largely discredited, pro-company organizations to advance their own reactionary agenda.

The Democrats, for their part, are somewhat more farsighted. They are well aware of the critical role the unions have played in suppressing the class struggle over the last three-and-a-half decades and facilitating a

transfer of wealth from the bottom to the top. The Democrats support these organizations not because they defend the interests of workers—the unions do not—but because they are useful in containing and dissipating social discontent and preventing the emergency of a far more radical challenge to the capitalist system.

The passage of the law in West Virginia is of particular significance since the Mountain State was once a stronghold of the United Mine Workers of America (UMW). From the 1880s to the 1980s, the state was the scene of some of the most bitter class conflicts in the United States, which were often referred to as “mine wars.”

From the mid-1970s onward, however, the UMW, like the nationalist and pro-capitalist unions throughout the US and the world, responded to globalization and the world economic crisis by abandoning any opposition to the employers and the government and adopting the corporatist doctrine of labor-management “partnership.”

After decades of betrayed strikes and collaboration in the destruction of jobs and living standards of miners, the unions have little or no support among the vast majority of workers and youth in West Virginia.

On the day the right-to-work bill was passed, the UMW was able to organize only a small rally at the state capitol building. The event was hosted by union president Cecil Roberts who, along with former UMW head and now AFL-CIO chief Richard Trumka, has overseen countless betrayals of coal miners, from the defeat of the 1989-90 Pittston strike to the more recent gutting of pensions by Peabody Coal and other energy giants.

Mining employment in West Virginia has plummeted over the past few years, with over 10,000 jobs shed in 2015 alone. According to the West Virginia office of Mine Health, Safety & Training, the number of active mines has fallen from 93 to 37, and employment stands

at 5,352. In neighboring Kentucky, the last UMW mine in the state was closed at the beginning of 2015.

Overall, 12.4 percent of workers (83,000) in West Virginia are still unionized, a rate slightly higher than the nationwide rate of 11.1 percent. This has not translated into better conditions for the vast majority of West Virginians. Instead, the state is the worst in the country for unemployment and the labor force participation rate. It is characterized by extreme poverty, with per capita income of \$23,237, and high inequality.

The Democrats and the UMW have long promoted the state as “business friendly,” offering generous tax incentives and a desperate pool of workers for corporations relocating to the area. As the West Virginia gubernatorial elections got underway, the UMW rushed to endorse billionaire Democratic candidate Jim Justice—the wealthiest man in the state, a coal executive whose mine operations are flush with both safety hazards and legal problems over the non-payment of local taxes.

On a national level, the UMW has collaborated with the Obama administration in the further destruction of the safety of mineworkers. Shortly after taking office in 2009, Obama appointed former UMW safety director Joe Main to head the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration (MSHA). Main, a champion of union-management partnership, has repeatedly bowed to coal industry demands concerning black lung-causing coal dust and explosion dangers, while issuing wrist-slap fines to corporate killers like Massey Coal.

The UMW and other unions claim their opposition to “right-to-work” laws is guided by concern for the rights of workers to collectively organize. This is a fraud. The unions are contemptuous of the democratic rights of workers. What they want to defend is their monopoly as the sole, legally recognized “representative” of workers.

The UMW has long employed thuggish methods against rank-and-file militants and socialist opponents who opposed its betrayal of workers’ interests. If workers were to organize independently and in opposition of the UMW, the union would use all the labor laws at its disposal to declare such a movement illegal.

Facing a largely hostile membership, the unions rely on sanctioning from the government and the good will

of a section of larger employers for the continued flow of dues money into their bank accounts, and to provide union officials with various government posts and seats on corporate boards.

For workers to defend their social and democratic rights, including the right to collectively organize, they must oppose all factions of the corporate and political establishment. New organizations of self-representation, democratically controlled by rank-and-file workers and based on the methods of the class struggle, must be built to unite miners and every other section of the working class in defense of jobs, living standards and safe work conditions.

Above all, workers must unite all of their struggles into a single political struggle to break the stranglehold of the global corporations and banks. The nationalism of the UMW and AFL-CIO, which subordinate US workers to American capitalism and its drive for the economic and military domination of the world, must be rejected. Instead, workers in the US must unite with our class brothers in Latin America, Africa, Asia, Europe and around the world to defend the rights of all workers to decent paying and secure jobs.

The only answer to the global economic crisis, which is throwing millions of workers out of their jobs from West Virginia to China, is to put the financial system and energy conglomerates under the public ownership and democratic control of the working class, as part of socialist reorganization of the world economy.



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