Illinois unions endorse billionaire J.B. Pritzker for governor

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On June 6, the Illinois AFL-CIO, the state-level union umbrella organization, voted to endorse billionaire J.B. (Jay) Pritzker as the Democratic Party candidate for governor in the 2018 elections.

Pritzker is an heir to the Hyatt Hotels fortune and a tech industry venture capitalist worth an estimated $3.5 billion. He announced his candidacy in April. Once referred to as "Chicago's second mayor" by *Chicago* magazine, Pritzker is intimately involved with the development of Democratic Mayor Rahm Emanuel's policies.

He and many others in his family advise the Democratic Party nationally. Penny Pritzker, Jay's sister, was most recently secretary of commerce under President Obama. Five of the Pritzkers are listed among Illinois' 16 billionaires, and six more are billionaires residing outside the state.

The socio-economic situation in the state of Illinois leading up to the November 6, 2018 elections is dire. The state has been without a budget for two years, leaving its colleges, universities and vital health and social service agencies to spend down their reserves, take on debt and beg from the public in order to continue operating. Multiple credit downgrades have been issued by the ratings agencies. The budget impasse orchestrated by both big business parties continues to drag on, with the two sides unable to come to an agreement on how best to slash spending on state workers' pensions, health benefits and workers compensation.

In the context of the economic downturn following the 2008 financial crisis, the state budget impasse has accelerated certain trends, including depopulation. Illinois is currently leading the nation in population loss, with more than 105,000 residents leaving in 2016. Cities are leading the demographic decline, but rural areas have been affected too, and some towns in the southern part of the state have lost 15 to 17 percent of their population in recent years. Where the state university system was once a big draw, a reported 16,000 Illinois high school students this year went to other states for college and university education.

The union's endorsement of Pritzker sets up the 2018 Illinois election to be a showdown between two major party candidates who are not merely representatives of the financial aristocracy, but are themselves members of the highest layer of that elite. Pritzker's speedy endorsement by the AFL-CIO, 10 months before the 2018 primaries, is only the latest example of the bankruptcy of the unions and their prostration before the financial elite.

The AFL-CIO's endorsement of a billionaire venture capitalist to govern a state strained by the bipartisan budget impasse is a clear expression of its own pro-capitalist and anti-working class orientation. It supports reactionary measures to bolster the profits of the corporations at the expense of the working class. The claim that making corporate America richer will improve the lot of workers is the basis for the worthless promises made by Trump, whose entire cabinet is positioned to further enrich the capitalist class by destroying whatever remains of the gains workers made in the course of a century of bitter struggles.

That Illinois Democrats are choosing to run Pritzker following the defeat of former Democratic Governor Pat Quinn in the 2014 election, not to mention the presidential campaign debacle of Hillary Clinton, says a great deal about their disconnect from the needs and concerns of the state's working class. The endorsement of a billionaire like Pritzker is largely based on the calculation that Rauner's intransigence in maintaining the budget impasse is harming a wide swathe of

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business interests that rely on various forms of state spending.

According to a report published on *CapitolFax.com*, the executive board barely passed the resolution to endorse Pritzker. The proposal passed with 19 votes, the required minimum, with seven no votes, two abstentions and three unmarked ballots.

The *Chicago Tribune* reported that several unions, including the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the Illinois Federation of Teachers and the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), were apparently concerned about the early endorsement, very likely worried that the selection of a billionaire like Pritzker undermines their ability to get workers to turn out for the Democratic Party.

AFSCME Council 31 said it would reserve the right to withhold its own endorsement of Pritzker in the primary election. Chicago Teachers Union President Karen Lewis, speaking at a May 23 City Club of Chicago luncheon, sought to signal skepticism, asking, “Can one oligarch replace another oligarch?... What’s going to be different?”

Illinois AFL-CIO President Michael T. Carrigan defended the federation’s early endorsement of Pritzker, saying in his statement, “The board followed a process that included meeting with the candidates and evaluating issue questionnaires. An early endorsement is necessary in order to achieve our top priority in 2018--defeating Governor Bruce Rauner, whose anti-worker proposals and refusal to compromise on a budget are destroying Illinois.”

The reality is that the Democrats were destroying Illinois and attacking workers long before Rauner came on the scene. Under former Democratic Governor Pat Quinn, and with solid super-majorities in both houses of the Illinois General Assembly, spending on higher education and social services was slashed. A report from the Center for Tax and Budget Accountability shows that since the 2000, adjusted for inflation and population, spending on higher education has fallen 41 percent, spending on human services by 34 percent, and spending on health care by 22 percent.

Quinn narrowly lost the 2014 election to Rauner as a result of mass abstention by workers in response to Quinn’s role in attacking pensions. Quinn claimed to have been “put on earth” to cut pensions, and his administration introduced a widely mocked cartoon character called “Squeezy the Pension Python” to show how pensions were supposedly squeezing the state budget of funds needed for education and social services.

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