

The significance of the repeal of Michigan's right-to-work law

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The United Auto Workers and other unions are hailing the repeal of so-called “right-to-work” legislation by the Democratic-controlled Michigan legislature as a great victory for workers. The legislature voted last month to remove the state ban on contracts that require payment of union dues as a condition of employment.

Janella James, executive director of the Michigan Nurses Association, called the repeal “the beginning of a new day in Michigan history,” while newly elected United Auto Workers President Shawn Fain proclaimed Michigan’s Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer “our friend, our ally and our sister.”

“Right-to-work” laws are regressive and have historically been aimed at undermining workers’ rights to organize and collectively resist their employers. However, the official trade unions that stand to benefit from the repeal long ago abandoned any effort to improve workers’ wages and conditions.

The immediate impact of ending right-to-work in Michigan is to funnel millions of dollars in additional income into union coffers by compelling the payment of dues to the union apparatus. The Democratic Party has generally favored using the services of the pro-corporate trade union bureaucracy to help suppress strikes and impose lower wages. This is in contrast to the Republicans, who have generally sought to cripple the unions financially, viewing them as an unnecessary overhead expense.

Significantly, the Democrats stripped out of the right-to-work repeal law language that would have rescinded the statewide ban on teachers’ strikes. The bill did include a provision requiring state contractors to pay prevailing wages, but the Democrats rejected a proposal requiring companies that receive state tax break and subsidies to pay prevailing wages. This is especially

significant given the plans of the Detroit-based automakers, who receive massive state handouts, to open new electric vehicle factories employing workers paid far less than the current average automotive wage.

The Michigan right-to-work legislation was enacted by the then-Republican-controlled legislature in 2012. The inability of the unions to mobilize effective opposition to the bill at the time demonstrated their moribund character, their lack of any genuine mass popular base and their dependence on the sanction of the employers and the capitalist state.

The repeal of right-to-work in Michigan marks the first time in nearly 60 years that such legislation has been overturned, despite intense lobbying by the unions. Twenty-six states still have right-to-work laws on the books. These are located mostly in the South, the Rocky Mountains and the Midwest, but the list also includes historically more heavily unionized states such as Iowa, Indiana and Wisconsin. Since 2011, four additional states besides Michigan have enacted right-to-work legislation.

Union membership in Michigan has declined from 629,000 in 2012 to 589,000 in 2022, hitting a low of just 540,000 in 2021. In percentage terms, the decline has been even more dramatic, from 16.6 percent of the public and private workforce in 2012 to 14.0 percent in 2022. Private-sector union membership in the state hit an historic low of 9.1 percent in 2021.

This is partly the result of passage of right-to-work, but at a more fundamental level it expresses the alienation of workers from the pro-company unions, which for the past four decades have presided over the elimination of hard-won gains, the imposition of multi-tier contracts, the spread of part-time and temporary work and the destruction of hundreds of thousands of jobs.

The UAW has been unable to organize any workers at the global transplant auto factories, including its humiliating 2-1 defeat at the Fuyao Glass plant in the former union stronghold of Dayton, Ohio.

Speaking at the recent UAW bargaining convention in Detroit, Governor Whitmer declared, “I’m here because the UAW has been a phenomenal partner to me, and I will continue so long as I’m in office to be a phenomenal partner to you, too.”

The governor touted the massive handouts lavished by the state on Ford, which recently confirmed plans to build a battery plant in Marshall in western Michigan. She said she would “fight like Hell” to bring even more battery-electric vehicle and semiconductor plants to Michigan.

In a submission to the state legislature accompanying its bid, Ford said the wage and benefit package at the plant would be around \$20 an hour, far below the standard at Michigan auto assembly plants and below the median household income in the area. Ford said it would allow the United Auto Workers to organize workers at the factory under an expedited procedure known as card check, requiring only that the union turn in signed authorization cards from a majority of workers. This was an obvious quid pro quo with the UAW, which no doubt agreed to take responsibility for imposing the poverty pay rate decreed by Ford management.

The repeal of right-to-work in Michigan is part of the broader policy of the Democratic Party and the Biden administration of shoring up the bureaucratic union apparatus and drawing it closer to the capitalist state, as the United States escalates its proxy war against Russia and prepares for war against China. Biden declared himself the most “pro-union” president in history and openly supported unionization efforts at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer, Alabama.

The real content of the Biden administration’s embrace of the union apparatus was demonstrated in the contract fight by 110,000 US railroad workers last fall, which ended with the administration pushing through legislation outlawing a strike and imposing a management-dictated contract that met none of workers’ demands for relief from inflation and murderous overwork. The dicatorial action relied on 100 percent cooperation from the leaders of the railroad unions to suppress rank-and-file opposition.

The American trade union bureaucracy has consistently demonstrated its unswerving support for the capitalist profit system throughout the pandemic, herding workers into unsafe factories, schools and offices while doing nothing to mitigate the ravaging of workers’ living standards by inflation. Meanwhile, the union apparatus has promoted US militarism, backing the US proxy war against Russia in Ukraine and pumping out nationalist demagoguery as the Biden administration moves toward world war.

While the UAW and other mass industrial unions were born out of the radicalization and upsurge of the working class in the 1930s, in part inspired by the Russian Revolution and the ideas of socialism, they have long ceased to function as workers’ organizations in any meaningful sense. The newly formed unions very quickly cemented an alliance with the big business Democratic Party based on a pro-capitalist and nationalist program.

Under the impact of globalization in the 1980s, the UAW and other unions abandoned even their timid reformist program in favor of corporatism, i.e., unlimited collaboration with the corporations in defense of American industry against foreign rivals. Today, the bureaucratized unions serve as an instrument of the bosses in imposing concessions on workers. In exchange for their services, corporations have funneled literally billions into the treasuries of the UAW other unions by means of various joint programs.

The precondition for the defense of workers’ most elementary rights is the independent mobilization of the working class through the building of rank-and-file committees in struggle against the two big business parties and the capitalist system, as part of the growing international offensive of the working class. This is the fight being undertaken by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Workers Alliance of Rank and File Committees.



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