

Obama's criticism of right-to-work law: The ruling class defends the unions

By Shannon Jones
13 March 2015

On Monday, President Obama issued a statement attacking the enactment of right-to-work legislation in the state of Wisconsin that bans the collection of union dues as a condition of employment in private companies. His remarks followed the signing of the bill into law earlier that day by Republican Governor Scott Walker.

Just before signing the bill, Walker, a likely 2016 presidential candidate, said that it “sends a powerful message across the country and around the world.” Walker recently compared his defiance of mass demonstrations by Wisconsin workers in 2011 to the fight against the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

While not mentioning Walker by name, Obama said that it was “inexcusable, that, over the past several years, just when middle class families and workers need that kind of security the most, there has been a sustained, coordinated assault on the unions, led by powerful interests and their allies in government.”

Obama's statement reflects differences within the ruling class, not over the defense of workers' interests, since the unions do not defend those interests, but on the best means to pursue attacks on the working class. The sections of big business that Obama speaks for see the unions as useful tools in imposing cuts and are concerned about attempts to undermine them.

Notably, neither the unions nor their Democratic Party supporters have much noise about the raft of budget cuts that Walker is also preparing, including a massive attack on higher education. Similar measures have been signed and implemented by Democratic Party governors throughout the country, and by the Obama administration at the national level.

Walker speaks for those sections of the ruling establishment that see the maintenance of the unions as a waste of money, a hindrance and a not insignificant

source of political funds for their big business rivals in the Democratic Party.

Right-to-work laws are reactionary, aimed at blocking any form of resistance by workers to collectively defend their interests. However, opposing these laws does not imply any support for the unions themselves. They have long ceased to defend the interests of workers and have been transformed into appendages of the corporations and the state. They function as business entities that operate for the financial benefit of the wealthy and corrupt officials who control them.

The unions have overseen the destruction of workers' living standards and working conditions over the past several decades and intervened to sabotage and defeat every attempt by workers to resist the attacks of the employers. The task before workers is to break the grip of these right-wing organizations and build new, democratic organizations of struggle.

The role of the unions has been concretely exposed once again in the conduct of the United Steelworkers and the AFL-CIO in isolating the strike of US oil workers, ensuring that it has had the most minimal impact on production possible and, amidst growing anger among ordinary workers, moving quickly to reach an agreement yesterday on company terms.

The unions oppose the establishment of right-to-work laws on the reactionary basis that they deprive them of the ability to collect dues payments from workers to fund their bloated apparatuses and finance their political contributions. They are well aware that if workers are not required to pay dues, they face a massive loss of income, since they are despised by large sections of the working class.

In other states where right-to-work has been implemented, workers have left the unions in droves.

Indeed, since the enactment of Act 10 in Wisconsin in 2011, which limited public employee bargaining rights, membership in the Wisconsin Education Council, the state affiliate of the National Education Association, has fallen by 50 percent. In Michigan, where a right-to-work bill passed in 2012, union membership declined by 48,000 in 2014, with the full impact yet to be felt.

The unions were in deep crisis even before the enactment of the latest spate of right-to-work bills. In Wisconsin, union membership has plummeted from 21 percent in 1990 to just 11.6 percent in 2014. Overall, US union membership stands at just 11.1 percent, the lowest level in more than 100 years. Strike activity has, meanwhile, virtually ceased.

The continued existence of the unions is entirely dependent on the support they receive from a section of big business and the political establishment, mainly the Democratic Party.

The enactment of right-to-work legislation in Wisconsin follows the defeat of the mass protest movement that erupted in February 2011 over budget cuts proposed by Walker. His so-called “Budget Repair Bill” imposed a wide array of cuts and threatened to strip workers of collective bargaining rights, criminalizing any form of resistance. The unions, which played no role in initiating the protests, did everything in their power to shut them down before they risked developing into a confrontation with the Obama administration.

To this end they diverted opposition to the budget bill into a campaign for the recall of Walker. They opposed calls for a general strike against Walker, limiting the struggle to a defense of the institutional interests of the unions, while abandoning any struggle against the budget cuts. The teachers rushed to agree to \$330 million in concessions from their members, including a de facto \$4,000 annual pay cut due to increases in health premiums. The purpose of these concessions was to make sure that new contracts were in place before the provisions of the budget bill ending the automatic dues deduction for public workers took effect. This had the effect of delaying the end of the dues check-off for the length of those contracts.

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