

Victory in Ohio anti-collective-bargaining law referendum

During an otherwise quiet “off-year” election day, the referendum vote in Ohio repealing Gov. John Kasich’s anti-collective-bargaining law sent the message far beyond the Buckeye State’s borders that voters will not support laws that try to balance state budgets at the expense of workers’ rights. The law fell to the overwhelming opposition of 61 percent of voters, with even many normally Republican districts favoring repeal.

“Ohioans from all backgrounds and political parties rejected the crazy notion that the 99 percent—nurses, bridge inspectors, firefighters and social workers—caused the economic collapse, rather than Wall Street,” AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said.

The controversial law, dubbed “SB5” after its Ohio Senate bill number, would have affected the state’s 400,000 public workers, restricting their ability to strike and bargain collectively. Under the law, they could negotiate only for wages and not for health insurance or pensions. It would also have prohibited all public employees from striking. And it could have increased employee contributions for pensions and health care.

After the bill became law by a narrow margin in the spring, unionists and activists vowed to overturn it. NALC members had been on the ground in Ohio since the referendum effort began, to help make it a reality. Five carriers were released from mid-March until the beginning of July to gather signatures and get the measure on the ballot. They were then released again from late September and early October through Election Day to help convince voters to go to the polls.

“You could feel the passion of everyone involved,” said Jacquelyn Mitchell, a Columbus Branch 78 trustee who was among those released. She noted regret among voters who had supported Kasich and other anti-union politicians in the previous election.

“People aren’t going to make the same mistake again,” she said.

The sentiments of others who had campaigned against SB5 were similar.



Photo by Karen Hickey

“It’s completely overwhelming,” said Sgt. T.J. Assion of the Mahoning County Sheriff’s Department. The law was “wrong from its inception,” and the fact that it was repealed by the voters “speaks volumes,” he said.

“We’re not the problem—we’re problem-solvers,” he continued. “Ask us to help you and we’ll help you. We do it for a living and we’ll do it in our contract, but don’t come in and destroy us like this bill was going to do.”

A defeated Kasich said, “It’s clear that the people have spoken. You have to listen...and frankly, I respect what people have to say in an effort like this.” He vowed to work with local governments to help them with their budgets.

Addressing the results, NALC President Fredric Rolando said, “This was a great victory, but it’s not the end of the fighting for collective bargaining and workers’ rights. We need to make sure that other states and the federal government don’t try to balance their budgets on the backs of their workers. That’s a fight we’ll never give up.” ☒

The repeal of SB5 effort gained support statewide, even in districts where voters traditionally vote Republican.