

# Right to work (for less) and other attacks on the nation's workers

**T**he country's attention recently returned to Wisconsin, as that state became Ground Zero in the fight for workers' rights yet again. But the battle in that and other states for so-called right-to-work laws is only part of the ongoing war against organized labor.

In March, Wisconsin became the 25th state to pass right-to-work legislation guaranteeing that workers cannot be forced to pay union dues or "fair share" fees to keep a job. Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, who has taken a prominent place in the race for the Republican Party's 2016 presidential nomination by attacking public-sector unions in the past, and triumphing, signed the bill weakening private-sector unions last month.

According to the AFL-CIO, 14 more states have right-to-work legislation, ballot measures or executive action to contend with, including Maine, West Virginia, Missouri and New Mexico. In New Mexico, the House passed a bill that would make the state a right-to-work state for public- and private-sector workers, while also increasing the minimum wage from \$7.50 to \$8. In Missouri, a number of bills have been introduced in the House, with one referred to the Senate. In West Virginia, the right-to-work bill remains before a Senate judiciary committee.

It's in state legislatures and on ballot initiatives that the right-to-work battles are taking place, with more expected in other states throughout the year. There also have been pushes in some states to undo prevailing-wage mandates for taxpayer-funded projects (mandates that require contractors on such projects to pay workers the typical wages for the region).

"Even though letter carriers are federal employees and not subject to these state laws," NALC President Fredric Rolando said, "those laws still have a big impact on us. We must protect the right of all

workers to enjoy good pay and benefits. If they lose these battles, how long do you think it will be before the corporate interests who are pushing for right-to-work laws come after our wages and benefits?"

There is concern in the nation's capital that forces are mobilizing to undercut national public-sector unions' abilities to organize and defend their members' rights. Reports have suggested that anti-worker legislators might introduce legislation that would strip public unions of their use of "fair share" fees, whereby workers pay for the costs associated with collective bargaining and contract administration. Since all workers in unionized workplaces share the benefits of unionization—and since unions are legally compelled to represent all of those workers, which requires use of unions' resources—labor advocates say that workers who choose not to become members should at least pay these fees in order to not become "free riders," gaining benefits from union representation without paying for them. The conservative-leaning Supreme Court could also take up a case on this very issue.

While not directly an issue for the National Association of Letter Carriers, other public-sector unions fear that legislation or a negative Supreme Court ruling could do severe damage to their ability to work for their members' rights.

Though the news reports sound ominous, there have been some victories for union activists as well, such as the passage of local laws mandating paid sick leave and higher minimum wages. Polling also has shown broad support for these initiatives, offering organized labor inroads into increasing the visibility of workers' rights.

"I encourage all NALC members to get involved in these issues, whether on the local, state or national stage," Rolando said. "Workers' greatest strength comes when we're organized." **PR**

Activists protested against the right-to-work legislation in Madison, WI.

Photo by Preston Austin