

The battles for public employees' collective-bargaining rights continue nationwide, with recent action in several states. While union activists can claim successes in repealing the Ohio anti-bargaining law and in ousting two state senators in Wisconsin, anti-union radicals are attempting to further their cause in other states.

In Wisconsin, activists delivered more than twice the number of signatures needed to trigger a recall election of Gov. Scott Walker. Delivering 1 million signatures, well more than the required 460,000 signatures, activists hoped to oust Walker for his efforts to effectively destroy the rights of public employees to collectively bargain. The number of signatures nearly matched the 1,128,159 votes Walker received to win the election in 2010, confirming poll numbers from late 2011 that showed 58 percent of Wisconsin voters favored his recall.

In addition, supporters of the recall effort gathered enough signatures against Wisconsin Senate Majority Leader Scott Fitzgerald, the state's lieutenant governor and two other state senators. The Wisconsin elections board will need to verify all the signatures before the recall process can continue.

Wisconsin State AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Stephanie Bloomingdale applauded union and community members who had done the hard work of collecting signatures. "Last February, when Gov. Walker announced his plan to bust public-sector unions and the middle class, a spark was lit and the people of Wisconsin began to take notice of Gov. Walker's real agenda," she said. "The signs are clear: His agenda is not working and the people of Wisconsin won't stand for two more years of Gov. Walker."

Indiana Gov. Mitch Daniels signed a so-called "right to work" bill into law on Feb. 1, making Indiana the first Midwestern state to adopt the controversial law. The law forces unions to represent non-member workers without charging them dues. Opponents have vowed to continue to fight the measure.

Tens of thousands of working people protested against the bill as it made its way through the Indiana House and Senate, and participated in a march from the statehouse to Super Bowl Village in Indianapolis after the bill became law. AFL-CIO Field Communications staffer Cathy Sherwin shared her experience from the march:

"Construction workers and teachers, grocery clerks and truck drivers cheered on the [marching] workers and elected officials with chants of 'Remember November,' vowing to take the state door-by-door, neighborhood-by-neighborhood."

This isn't the first time Indiana has enacted a "right to work" law. A similar bill passed in 1957, but not only did voters turn out the Republican majority in the next election cycle, they repealed the law in 1965.

In Minnesota, where NALC will hold our convention this summer, some Republican state senators are following the lead of their Indiana counterparts. They proposed an amendment to the state constitution to bar labor contracts from requiring both public and private workers to pay union fees or compelling membership. The amendment requires only a simple majority in the State House and Senate to become law, and completely bypasses Gov. Mark Dayton, a Democrat.

While Democrats have vowed to fight the proposal, Republicans hold narrow majorities in both legislative chambers.

Democratic State Sen. Barb Goodwin said the plan is simply an attempt to weaken unions. "The playground bullies are attacking working people again," she said. But, "it will bring working people out to vote. And that's not a bad thing."

In Arizona, several anti-union bills are working their way through the legislature, and if passed as expected, would ban collective bargaining by public employees, end automatic payroll deductions for dues and prohibit compensation for performing union duties. Unlike in some other states, police and firefighters' unions would not be exempted.

Anti-union sentiment is strong in Arizona, as the state has been "right to work" since its inception and has one of the lowest percentages of unionized workers in the U.S.

"The fight to save collective bargaining in the states is a letter carrier fight," NALC President Fredric Rolando said. "If they can strip our brothers and sisters of their rights at the state and local level, nothing will stop them from coming after our rights at the federal level. That's why full-time NALC activists worked on solidarity campaigns in states like New Hampshire, Ohio and Wisconsin last year and that's why NALC will be part of any fight against radical politicians who attack workers' rights anywhere." ☒

American workers' collective-bargaining rights at risk



Photo by M. Peake

Activists march through Indianapolis on Feb. 2 to protest the "right to work" legislation being passed in the statehouse.