Update: Stopping the War on Workers

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IBT - Legislative sessions are winding down in many states, but the momentum continues for working families to use our strength in numbers to reclaim the American dream.

Though 14 states tried to pass right-to-work (for less) bills to destroy unions, only New Hampshire has come close to succeeding. Public opinion has shifted in favor of collective bargaining rights as unions took center stage in many state capitols. A Gallup poll in April showed almost half of Americans agree with workers and their unions. Only 39 percent agree with the governors who attacked working people. The popularity of those governors – Scott Walker in Wisconsin, Tom Corbett in Pennsylvania, Rick Snyder in Michigan, John Kasich in Ohio, Rick Scott in Florida, and Paul LePage in Maine – has plummeted in the polls.

Protest moved to action in Wisconsin, where Teamsters gathered signatures to recall Republican senators who voted to strip collective bargaining rights from public sector unions. In Wisconsin’s entire history, only four recall elections have been held. Remarkably, volunteers gathered enough signatures to require six Republican senators to face recall on July 12. Paid, out-of-state companies collected enough signatures to recall three Democratic senators who left the state to prevent the anti-worker vote, including our Teamster brother, Dave Hansen. Those signatures, however, are riddled with error. The Democratic Party of Wisconsin is alleging fraud and trying to quash the recall elections for the three senators.

Ohio law allows citizens to repeal unpopular laws. SB 5, the bill to take away collective bargaining rights from government workers, is extremely unpopular. A Wenzel Strategies survey from April shows 51 percent of Ohio voters favor a repeal of SB5, compared with just 38 percent who said they would vote to keep the new law in place.

As soon as Gov. John Kasich signed SB 5, Teamsters prepared for a massive signature-gathering drive. Local 436 trained 63 petition gatherers in one night. Teamsters throughout the state fanned out to collect the 300,000-plus signatures to put the veto on the 2011 ballot in November.

In Florida, the Legislature passed a budget that lets the state privatize prisons in Region 4 of the Florida Department of Corrections (FDOC) system. Gov. Rick Scott is expected to sign this attack on FDOC officers into law. With the passage of this bill, correctional officers at facilities in 18 counties in the state will face an uncertain future as their livelihoods and families’ future will be sold to the lowest bidder. Teamsters International Vice President Ken Wood denounced the prison privatization, saying, “This legislation is an attack on dedicated public employees in the state of Florida.”

The good news in Florida is the failure of an effort to prevent public unions from using automatic payroll deduction to collect dues and to take away the right of unions to use payroll deductions for political purposes. A similar effort failed in Kansas.

An attempt to weaken child labor laws in Maine was killed by a unanimous committee vote last Friday.

In Massachusetts, the House passed a bill that takes away public unions’ right to bargain collectively for health benefits. Senate President Therese Murray has said she opposes the bill, as
does Gov. Deval Patrick. The bill’s fate is uncertain.

Last week, the New Hampshire Legislature passed a right-to-work (for less) bill to destroy unions despite Democratic Gov. John Lynch’s veto threat. Today, Gov. Lynch vetoed the bill. Speaker of the House William O’Brien is expected to bring up an override vote of the veto as early as May 25. Teamsters Local 633 in Manchester has taken charge of counting votes to make sure opponents of the bill would be there to block any attempt to override the veto.

We have neglected to mention the good work of Vermont Local 597 in South Barre, which was the lead organizer of the Feb. 26 rally in Montpelier. Dan Brush wrote a resolution to support the right of collective bargaining, which was passed by the House and Senate and forwarded to the Governors of Wisconsin, Ohio, and Indiana.

Teamsters were by far the largest contingent at a May Day rally that drew 2,000 people near the Statehouse in Hartford. Connecticut workers haven’t endured the kind of assaults experienced by workers in Ohio, Florida, Wisconsin and elsewhere. But Dave Lucas, Teamsters Local 671’s principal officer, told the crowd that they’d better be ready. “It can come up on you any time,” he said. “We gotta be ready for it and send a message: “Don’t bring that crap here.”

Connecticut Teamsters came from Locals 493 in New London, Local 1150 in Stratford and Local 671 in Bloomfield. Joint Council 10 from New England brought four or five carloads of Teamsters (along with the Teamsters truck). Teamsters drove all the way from Local 633 in Manchester, N.H., Local 10 in Boston and Local 40 from Mansfield, Ohio. Local 671 gave “Stop the War on Workers’ t-shirts to members and sold them to others at cost. They were gone by the end of the day.

“We really beat the bushes to get them to go, to get them aware, and it really worked,” Lucas said. “This took on a meaning. We got something going.”

To stay on top of our battle against corporate-backed politicians who are waging war on workers, go to www.stopthewaronworkers.org.

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