



In Great Lakes States, Unions' Right-to-Work Retribution Fizzles

GOP Governors who challenged Big Labor all returned to office

By [Tom Gantert](#)

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In December of 2012, in the aftermath of Michigan's Republican Legislature passing a right-to-work law, thousands of union members from around the state participated in a teleconference where their leaders [promised "retribution" against the GOP](#).

One union member wondered if Democrats took control of the Legislature, "Could we shove it right down their throats?"

Al Garrett, president of Michigan AFSCME Council 25, shot back: "If we were to change the composition of both houses, where we were the majority and had the governor, no question we would be able to get rid of it right away. ... In November of 2014, we vote to change the composition of those bodies. ... We will not forget the folks who did this to us."

Garrett said the union would "make sure we identify the folks who did us in and get them out of office."

In Michigan, the day after the November 2014 elections, those threats ring hollow.

Incumbent GOP Gov. Rick Snyder defeated his pro-labor Democratic challenger Mark Schauer and Michigan Republican Party maintained its control of both houses. The state's new right-to-work law was barely mentioned by the candidates during the campaign.

Similar scenarios played out in Wisconsin and Ohio, where GOP governors won elections after making major labor reforms that upset unions in those states.

F. Vincent Vernuccio, director of labor policy at Mackinac Center for Public Policy, said the AFL-CIO had identified five states as "must-win" for their survival – Michigan, Ohio, Florida, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. After Tuesday, a Democratic governor serves only in Pennsylvania.

"It really again brings into question big labor's business model of compulsion, intimidation and politics. It is simply not working," Vernuccio said. "Brave elected officials that protect freedom and take on big labor's privileges are withstanding the union political juggernaut."

In Wisconsin, Act 10 championed by Republican Gov. Scott Walker was passed in 2011. It required government employees to contribute more for their health insurance benefits, and limited collective bargaining for public sector unions to wages only. Walker won a recall election in 2012 and won re-election on Tuesday. Act 10 was not a focus for his Democratic challenger.

In Ohio, led by GOP Gov. John Kasich, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 5, which also limited public sector union collective bargaining privileges. Unions scored a victory in 2012 when the law was overturned in a referendum.

But on Tuesday, Walker, Kasich and Snyder all won re-election after challenging the power of their states' union establishments.

Legislators in Indiana also defied the unions by passing a right-to-work law in 2012 (a challenge to the law is currently being considered by state's Supreme Court.) That right-to-work bill was signed by GOP Gov. Mitch Daniels, who was prohibited by term limits from running for re-election that year, and was replaced by Mike Pence, another Republican.

“We are seeing the rejection of the blue model – strong public sector unions and collective bargaining that was supposed to improve conditions for the middle class,” said Patrick Wright, senior legal analyst at The Mackinac Center for Public Policy. “In race after race after race, the people who citizens trusted more was the Republicans and not the public sector unions.”

The Walker victory in Wisconsin was pegged as “[The Most Important Race In America](#)” by the left-leaning political site Slate.

“Walker is revered among national conservatives for taking on Wisconsin's power public sector unions at enormous political risk,” Slate's Betsy Woodruff reported two days before Tuesday's election. Walker was reelected with 52 percent of the vote, over 47 percent for Democrat challenger Mary Burke.

"Big Labor is loathe to admit it but Wisconsin taxpayers embrace Act 10 and the almost \$3 billion dollars in savings we have realized just by asking government employees to pay a modest amount towards their health insurance and pension," said Brett Healy, president of the MacIver Institute in Wisconsin. "Walker's victories over unions should give lawmakers across the country the confidence that they can make common sense, taxpayer-friendly changes to collective bargaining and be rewarded by voters. In the past, that was not always the case."

“Scott Walker's victory in Wisconsin is the strongest indicator of labor's political decline,” said John Samples, vice president of Cato Institute who directs the Center for Representative Government.

In that 2012 Michigan teleconference, union leaders hinted that through recall campaigns and a ballot initiative the right-to-work law wouldn't be around by 2014. Lawrence Roehrig, secretary treasurer of AFSCME Michigan Council 25, described the strategy:

“Do not panic,” Roehrig said. “Be union. Be registered. Get ready to vote.”