

Behind Southern governors' anti-union agenda

written by Gregory E. Williams
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It pays to play. Pennsylvania billionaire Jeff Yass gives Texas governor Greg Abbott \$6 million to get his preferred policies enacted.

Southern politicians who sold their souls to the corporations and banks are a bit rattled right now, and who can blame them? Volkswagen workers won big in Chattanooga, Tennessee, when 73% of plant workers voted to join the United Auto Workers Union.

This is the first time that autoworkers have successfully unionized via election in the South since the 1940s! What if more of us workers here in the South get an idea?

Before the vote even happened, six “anti-woke” southern governors put out a joint letter condemning the union. That should tell us how significant the unionization victory is.

Seriously. The Volkswagen vote is a big deal for all workers in the region. When economists compare workers of the same type, with the only difference being whether they’re union members, unionized workers earn 10-15% more in wages according to the U.S. Department of the Treasury. That’s just wages. Unionized workers have better benefits and working conditions, too.

And unlike with “trickle down economics” – the now totally disproven idea that tax breaks for the ultra-wealthy will trickle down to the rest of us – when it comes to the benefits of unions, the high tide really does lift all workers’ boats. The Treasury Department admits that the data is clear on this point. There is a spillover.

For every 1% increase in union membership in the private sector, that results in a 0.3% increase in wages for nonunion workers, and the benefits are greatest for workers without college degrees.

Workers in states that have extreme anti-union laws (misleadingly called “right to work” or RTW laws) make 3.2% less on average than those doing the same job in states with less restrictions on unions. That is to say, full time workers in RTW states like Louisiana or Mississippi make about \$1,670 less per year.

The letter written by the governors has a laughable graphic saying “Republican governors stand with American Auto Workers.” It’s signed by Kay Ivey (Alabama), Brian Kemp (Georgia), Tate Reeves (Mississippi), Henry McMaster (South Carolina), Bill Lee (Tennessee), and Greg Abbott (Texas). Every word of the statement is a lie. We should ask who they’re working for, because it ain’t us.

Roster of shame

The governors’ main claim is that all the jobs are going to leave if the workforce unionizes. But there is no correlation between whether a state has RTW laws, and thus low unionization rates, and employment. When you look at whether prime working-age people (ages 25-54) have a job in RTW vs. non-RTW states, there’s no systematic difference. Fluctuations in employment follow the same capitalist boom-and-bust cycles (expansion followed by recession) across states.

Forbes looked at U.S. Census data for 2023 and ranked the states with highest and lowest poverty levels. Mississippi comes in as the poorest state, with 19.1% living below the federal poverty level. So there’s Tate Reeve’s state.

(U.S.-occupied Puerto Rico has a poverty rate of 43%, but the island is not a state, so is usually not included on these lists. It’s being plundered by corporations and banks. U.S. out of Puerto Rico, now! Puerto Rico will be free!)

Louisiana has the second-highest poverty level, but our governor – Jeff Landry – didn’t sign the letter; maybe because auto-manufacturing hasn’t taken off here yet. Alabama is the 7th highest, so Kay Ivy gets an “F.” South Carolina comes in at number 10; Henry McMaster is another loser.

So, three out of six of the signees govern states in the top 10 poorest. And since they’re doing absolutely nothing to alleviate poverty, we can rest assured that they do not care about workers, only about making themselves and their big donors rich.

There's no reason to trust them about unions.

Speaking of big donors, a Mississippi Today investigation in late 2023 found that Tate Reeve's top campaign contributors brought home a whopping \$1.4 billion in state contracts and grants, all from agencies Reeves oversees. It pays to play! Or is it pay to play?

Texas-sized hypocrisy

According to Market Realist, Greg Abbott has a net worth of \$14 million. In December 2023, his campaign received \$6 million – “the largest single donation in Texas history,” in the campaign's words – from Pennsylvania billionaire Jeff Yass.

Yass is thought to have \$29 billion. He's the co-founder and managing director of investment firm Susquehanna International Group.

Why would a Pennsylvania capitalist be funding Texas politics? Because he champions the anti-public school voucher movement, tax cuts for billionaires, and all manner of other things that only benefit the rich. He's making an investment in Texas.

The truth is that there is nothing unusual about these shenanigans, and Democratic politicians are no better. The Washington Post said it: “More than half of those who served in the House and Senate were worth more than \$1 million; many had net worths that stretched into the tens of millions.”

We should not be surprised where these capitalist politicians' allegiances lie. Every time they try to stir us up about unions, trans people, immigrants, or some supposed foreign adversary, we should ask: “What's in it for you?”

