



Do Right-To-Work Laws Actually Help Workers -- Or Management?

By Dan Fastenberg – 12/13/12

It should come as no surprise that activists on the left are pushing for unions to adopt new strategies to broaden their appeal -- and clout. After all, the number of Americans who are part of an organized union has dropped from a third of the country's workers in the 1950s to only about a tenth last year.

Conservatives, meanwhile, have been calling for a radical overhaul, arguing that compulsory union dues make corporations less profitable by steering money to unions that could go into keeping companies healthy for everyone, including workers. And so they've been championing right-to-work laws, like the one passed in Michigan this week. Michigan is the 24th state in the country to adopt such laws, which make it illegal to mandate workers to join unions or pay union dues.

Proponents Claim Right To Work Laws 'Empower' Workers

That's the argument used by Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder, who stressed that the laws give workers the right to decide whether to join the union. It was also the rationale cited by Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker, who pushed through a law in 2011 that restricted the ability of public employees to bargain collectively. The Wisconsin law, which Walker said would help small businesses in the state, was found by a county judge not to apply to city, county and school district workers, but left intact for state employees.

Proponents also point to a 2010 study by the libertarian think tank, the Cato Institute, which found that income per capita was 23 percent higher in right-to-work states as compared to states without such laws. "Labor unions used to represent common muscle. Workers who essentially all had the same skills," says Tim Kane, the chief economist at the Hudson Institute, a right-leaning Washington D.C.-based think tank. "But now you have a diversified workforce with individual workers who have individual skill sets and ambitions. Giving

the voice back to the individual seems balanced. Such a view is not a loss of union strength, it's just an evolution."

A Wall Street Journal editorial, meanwhile, argued that compelling all workers to join a union will "extract monopoly wages and benefits for a time from a profitable industry." But over time, that will come at a cost -- making the industry less competitive and eventually eliminating union jobs.

Conservatives: Unions Are To Blame For Corporate Failures

Many on the right point to Hostess Brands' recent shutdown to make that argument. "How much did the employees of Hostess benefit from their unions?" asks James Sherk, the senior labor policy analyst at the right-leaning think tank, the Heritage Foundation, after the maker of Twinkies, Ding Dongs and Ho Ho's closed after 82 years.

The Hostess closure put more than 18,000 people out of work and occurred after the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union and management failed to reach an agreement on a new contract.

Management wanted to slash workers' wages by 8 percent. Critics from the right defended the move by pointing out that the company's agreement with the union required Hostess to support 80 different health plans, according to Forbes. "Labor needs to be less focused on extracting profits in an us versus them mentality," says Sherk, "and more on adding value to make workers more productive [through training programs]."

But What About The Thousands Of Workers Protesting The Laws?

Of course many workers would respond that the problem is hardly that America's working class is earning too much -- but too little. Indeed, the most visible supporters of the law are not rank-and-file employees, but Republican politicians and business executives. "Since when does our governor determine what is right for the working class?" Cindy Samuel, a medical transcriptionist from Mainstee, Mich., asked on Yahoo News in objecting to the passage of the right-to-work law in her state. Samuel explained her view:

"Right-to-work doesn't mean more jobs are coming to Michigan. It could mean more would leave along with the people who could potentially lose jobs. ... While the right to collectively bargain is supposedly federally protected, that doesn't mean all employees are going to be treated equally in terms of job protection, wages or benefits."

And just this week, an estimated 12,500 rallied in Lansing, Mich., against the right-to-work laws. The protesters (pictured above) -- many of them teachers -
- raised concerns that these laws would weaken unions, which in turn would erode their wages.

The rallies also took place in the wake of a series of recent protests by workers -- representing a broad range of sectors -- who've been speaking out for a living wage, among other social justice causes. The protests have included walkouts by fast food workers in New York City and Walmart employees nationwide.

President Obama, meanwhile, has expressed support. In speaking about the right-to-work law while touring Michigan, the president said, "what they're really talking about is giving you the right to work for less money."