



## Helping Illinois Public Sector Workers Leave Their Union

By Connor D. Wolf

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With the governor's recent announcement that union dues will be optional for government workers in Illinois, a national conservative group is stepping in to help.

On Monday, newly elected Republican Gov. Bruce Rauner issued an executive order making union dues optional for government workers. In response, the National Right to Work Foundation (NRTW) issued a statement offering free legal aid to public employees who wish to stop paying union dues.

"Governor Rauner issued an executive order late Monday that instructs all state agencies to put in escrow, pending the outcome of a federal court lawsuit the governor filed the same day, all forced union-fee deductions from nonmember state employees' wages required by Illinois' public-sector labor relations statute," NRTW noted in a press release.

Rauner's decision comes after a series of proposed labor policy reforms that he has dedicated himself to in the short time since taking office in January. Prior to his latest speech, Rauner pointed toward Prevailing Wage Laws and Project Labor Agreements as some of the few examples of how labor unions are hurting the state through unfair laws by increasing costs of public projects.

Project Labor Agreements are deals between owners of construction projects and construction unions in which firms must enter into collective bargaining with a union, hire workers through the union and pay union wages and benefits. In government contracting, a prevailing wage is the hourly wage, benefits and overtime that must be paid to the majority of workers within a particular area.

According to a report by the libertarian Cato Institute, Project Labor Agreements alone can add 12 to 18 percent to the cost of public projects.

“The governor’s lawsuit asks that a judgment be entered declaring unconstitutional the provisions of state collective bargaining agreements that require nonmember state employees to pay union fees, a judgment that would effectively grant those workers Right to Work protections,” the press release detailed.

NRTW advocates for right-to-work policies by offering legal assistance to workers in conflict with their union. The group argues workers should not be forced into a union as a condition of employment. The position, though hotly debated, is very popular with 24 states currently under their own right-to-work laws.

Rauner hopes that reforming labor policy and unions will allow the state to overcome some major economic obstacles that have hindered progress in recent years. According to a report by The Illinois Policy Institute, the state is struggling in jobs and education, two areas vital to economic growth and stability.

Unions were quick to condemn the executive order, arguing that it is illegal and that it will hurt many workers.

“Child protection workers, caregivers for veterans and the disabled, correctional officers and everyone else employed by state government has a right to a voice at work and in the democratic process through their union,” Roberta Lynch, the executive director of the AFSCME Council 31, declared in a statement.

“Bruce Rauner’s scheme to strip the rights of state workers and weaken their unions by executive order is a blatantly illegal abuse of power,” Lynch argued. “Perhaps as a private equity CEO Rauner was accustomed to ignoring legal and ethical standards, but Illinois is still a democracy and its laws have meaning.”

Mark Mix, the president of NRTW, disagrees, arguing that the decision will help many workers in the state.

“Governor Rauner’s actions may give Illinois public employees the Right to Work protections they so desperately need and deserve,” Mix noted in a statement. “These are bold steps to protect Illinois state employees’ rights not to pay tribute to union bosses as a condition of working as public servants.”

“Unfortunately, union officials won’t give up their forced dues power easily. In addition to fighting Governor Rauner in court, it won’t be surprising to see them make it difficult for workers to exercise their rights,” Mix concluded. “State employees who try to exercise those rights may encounter stonewalling, intimidation, or harassment at the hands of union officials.”