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Created *Mar 5 2011 - 8:05pm*

Fiscal worries, union power-grabs spark new Right-to-Work campaigns

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In 1997, legendary journalist Robert Novak summed up renewed interest in the Right-to-Work issue thusly: "It's so old-fashioned it's a brand new idea."

Over a decade later, that observation still rings true. Faced with intractable budget crises and Big Labor power grabs, states are increasingly turning to an old solution -- Right-to-Work laws -- to protect worker freedom and jump-start their troubled economies.

Thirteen states recently introduced Right-to-Work legislation to ensure no worker can be forced to join a union or pay union dues as a condition of employment, and a number of others may soon join them.

In New Hampshire, a Right-to-Work bill has already sailed through the lower chamber. In Indiana, another Right-to-Work bill was in the offing until Gov. Mitch Daniels abruptly decided he had "other priorities." Apparently, freedom of association didn't merit inclusion in Daniels' supposedly "bold" governing agenda.

Meanwhile, several Michigan lawmakers are considering special "Right-to-Work zones" in a state long considered a bastion of forced unionism. While hardly adequate to fully protect employee choice, these embryonic reform proposals point to a significant shift in state labor politics.

The impetus behind this wave of Right-to-Work legislation isn't a mystery: Big budget deficits, declining revenues and slumping economic growth have forced many states to reconsider their fiscal priorities, while a prolonged recession has legislators scrambling for policies with a proven record of job creation.

Fortunately, renewed interest in Right-to-Work happens to coincide with a historic opportunity. In November, voters across the country kicked many of Big Labor's loudest forced-unionism apologists out of statehouses, where they once wielded tremendous power to obstruct or block Right-to-Work legislation.

The logic of state Right-to-Work laws is ironclad: Not only is safeguarding worker freedom the right thing to do, it also yields tremendous economic benefits. Recent studies from the Cato Institute and the National Institute for Labor Relations Research suggest that Right-to-Work states enjoy higher job growth and more cost-of-living-adjusted disposable income for workers

than their forced-unionism counterparts.

They also seem to be weathering the recession better than old Midwestern industrial bastions like Michigan, Illinois and Indiana, states that lack protections for individual workers' rights.

Perhaps the most compelling evidence in favor of state Right-to-Work laws was reported in a Wall Street Journal editorial last year. Citizens are voting with their feet, leaving forced-unionism states in droves for job opportunities with their Right-to-Work neighbors.

Big Labor's recent muscle-flexing may have also helped awaken the public to the dangers of overly powerful union bosses. Spurred by reports of massive union campaign spending and disruptive public demonstrations in Wisconsin and elsewhere, voters are questioning why union officials are empowered to compel nonunion workers to pay dues, which are often funneled into political activities.

What isn't new is Americans' support for Right-to-Work. For decades, polls have shown that the public overwhelmingly agrees with the principle that union membership and dues payment should be voluntary, not forced. A recent poll even demonstrated that 80 percent of union members agree with the Right-to-Work principle, the same amount as the public at large.

Sometimes, the old, tried-and-true solution is the best solution, period. The 22 states that currently enjoy Right-to-Work protections provide compelling evidence of the benefits of safeguarding worker freedom. Perhaps more importantly, they're in the process of attracting the best and brightest from forced-unionism states in search of better and more plentiful job opportunities.

As state legislators look to protect employees' rights and revive their flagging economies, it's no wonder they're turning to Right-to-Work laws.

Mark Mix is president of the National Right-to-Work Committee.

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