

Sponsor says anti-union law will save Ohio money

By [Christopher Magan](#), Staff Writer

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Some local and state leaders agree provisions of a state Senate bill that would make sweeping changes to Ohio labor law will give governments more flexibility. But it is unclear if the changes would lead to better fiscal health for a state battling an \$8 billion deficit and most local governments struggling financially.

State Sen. Shannon Jones, R-Clearcreek Twp., introduced a bill earlier this week that she believes would provide lawmakers more flexibility and help cut the state deficit. If passed and signed by Gov. John Kasich, the major components of Jones' bill would:

- Eliminate collective bargaining for 40,000 state employees.
- Weaken binding arbitration for police and firefighters.
- Take automatic pay increases and health insurance bargaining away from local workers.

"Everyone is in agreement that the world has changed and there is going to be less money," Jones said. "I think it is important we address this issue for the long-term prosperity of the state of Ohio."

Montgomery County Administrator Deborah Feldman said measures that allow outside arbitrators to settle contract disputes for public safety workers who cannot strike have been "at times" costly for the county.

"For the most part our employees are willing to adjust to our financial situation," Feldman said. "The overall issue is improvements can be made to any law. We have to understand what those improvements are and make sure they are positive for the county."

Van Keating, who negotiates with teachers' unions for the Ohio School Boards Association, said changes to collective bargaining would be helpful to districts now facing unknown budget cuts from the state. Eighty percent or more of districts' budgets go to salaries, and most employees are unionized.

"We are limited by how we can deal with budget cuts, we have to negotiate and if the union doesn't agree, it doesn't happen," Keating said. "It would certainly give a great deal of flexibility to boards making cuts."

But David Romick, president of the Dayton Education Association with 1,150 members, said teachers have made sacrifices. Collaborations between unions and administrators led to Ohio winning \$400 million in Race to the Top funding from the federal government.

"How a school district runs depends on having teachers and administrators working together."

Legislator, union leaders disagree

Gov. John Kasich said Thursday if the legislators don't reform collective bargaining, he will put provisions in his budget, expected next month, that will.

"Reducing cost of government at every level is very important," said Rob Nichols, a Kasich spokesman. "There are many things that need to be done in tandem. What (Jones) is doing is decidedly pro-taxpayer and pro-Ohio competitiveness."

Union leaders argue the opposite, saying the proposals will make Ohio less competitive by driving the best teachers, university researchers, safety forces and government experts to states with union protections.

"It will just make it much harder to attract high-quality faculty," said Rudy Fichtenbaum, a Wright State University economics professor and member of the American Association of University Professors national bargaining team.

Jones bristles at that argument, saying the market will dictate pay and benefits that attract the best candidates. "I don't see how (that) is even possible," Jones said. "We need to have people to do the jobs and for them to want to do the jobs we need to pay them what the market will bear."

Jones spent a year researching and drafting her bill that would also reduce the rights of teachers unions, leaving only the ability to negotiate for pay and benefits.

She said some officials didn't think she went far enough and want to eliminate all public unions or give municipalities the ability to opt-out.

Ohio in the middle of union membership

The number of state and local government workers in unions varies greatly across the country with Ohio ranking in the middle. Forty-four percent of Ohio's state and local government workers are unionized.

New York has the highest union membership rate among state and local workers, at 70.5 percent, and laws that guarantee unions the power to negotiate everything from raises to pensions.

Mississippi has the lowest unionization rate, at 7.4 percent, and lacks any collective bargaining rights for state workers or membership incentives

Like Ohio, the new governors of Iowa and Wisconsin — all Republicans with Democratic predecessors — are gearing up for heated showdowns with unions in their states. Tennessee, Idaho and Indiana also have bills in their legislatures to cut union strength.

Chris Edwards, an economist with the libertarian Cato Institute, says unions have an unfair monopoly in the public sectors of many states and push for larger government that creates more debt. "It might be that states that get into fiscal trouble get into it for other reasons, but to fix the trouble they need flexibility," Edwards said.

"Unions have become the whipping boy of the recession," said Gary Chaison, a professor who studies unions and government at Clark University in Massachusetts, an expert recommended by the Pew Charitable Trust. "Nowadays you get elected governor by declaring you will fight the unions."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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