



Wisconsin Union Battle Could Set Stage for National 'Right-to-Work' Debate

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The standoff in Wisconsin over the benefits and rights of public employees could for the first time in decades spur changes across the country over so-called "right-to-work" laws -- or laws that prohibit unions from forcing workers to join.

For years, the country has been split practically 50-50 between states that allow employees to decide whether to join a union and states that allow unions to require membership. Most southern and central Midwestern states are right-to-work states, while the West Coast, New England and the northern Midwest comprise what critics call "forced-unionism" states.

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Along with requiring public employees to contribute more to pensions and health care coverage, Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker wants to put his state in the right-to-work column. His proposals have touched off an epic battle in Madison between pro-labor Democrats and Republicans who say they're just trying to balance the budget.

And now that battle is spreading.

Thronges of union members and supporters gathered in Indianapolis Monday for a protest against a proposed bill in the Indiana House that would restrict collective bargaining rights and make it a misdemeanor to require any employee to join or pay dues to a union.

Republican state Rep. Jerry Torr, the bill's author, described his proposal as a tool to attract business to Indiana. He told **Fox59 in Indianapolis** that prospective employers are avoiding the state because they're worried about its work rules.

"What I'm trying to do is bring jobs to Indiana," **Torr said**. "We have lost manufacturing jobs in Indiana because we are not a right-to-work state."

But opponents say it will lower pay and hurt workers.

"This is an attack on the middle class," Allison Luthe, a community organizer with Central Indiana Jobs With Justice, told FoxNews.com. She estimated about 2,000 people were at the Indianapolis protest as of Monday morning.

Indiana AFL-CIO President Nancy Guyott claimed the bill would be a "political payoff to wealthy campaign donors," according to Fox59.

Currently 22 states have right-to-work laws, according to the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation. Research by the National Conference of State Legislatures shows that several states in New England and in the northern Midwest are now considering right-to-work proposals.

Minnesota state Rep. Keith Downey wants right-to-work language enshrined in his state's constitution -- that's part of a proposal he's putting forward that would also slash the state work force and freeze pay.

Michigan's Legislature is also weighing the idea of letting local jurisdictions create right-to-work zones. New Mexico, Connecticut and Alaska, among other states, have right-to-work bills currently in committee.

In Wisconsin, Walker is casting every component of his plan as critical.

He told "Fox News Sunday" that he's not willing to hammer out a compromise that leaves collective bargaining rights in place -- even if the state Senate Democrats who skipped town in order to prevent a vote agree on raising benefits contributions.

Walker said he wants to give local governments "the tools they need to balance the budget now and in the future" by changing the collective bargaining laws. His office released a fact sheet Monday giving examples of benefits won through collective bargaining, including health insurance that covers Viagra.

Plus, Walker said workers must have the "flexibility" to stay out of a union -- and in turn avoid dues payments -- if they choose.

"For us, if you want to have democracy, if you want to have the American way, which is allowing people to have a choice, that's exactly what we're allowing there," Walker said. "People see the value, they see the work, they can continue to vote to certify that union and they can continue to voluntarily have those union dues, and write the check out and give it to the union to make their case, but they shouldn't be forced to be a part of this if that's not what they want to do."

But Luthe suggested the debate is about more than just giving workers a choice. She described the bills -- out of Wisconsin, Indiana and elsewhere -- as an assault on middle-class employees. She estimated wages could fall by more than \$5,000 per worker if the proposal passes.

"This is an organized, national agenda that they're bringing to Indiana," she told FoxNews.com.

She also contested the notion that businesses are avoiding Indiana, or any non-right-to-work state, because of the union issue.

"Businesses look at right-to-work as, like, number 24 out of 25 in their decision-making," she said. Asked about what the proposal could do to union membership, Luthe said it would be "devastating" but that it's not just a membership issue.

"It's about quality of life," she said.

Right-to-work advocates say states with those laws on the books are more conducive to economic growth. A recent report in the libertarian Cato Institute's Cato Journal written by Ohio University economics Prof. Richard Vedder found that about 4.7 million Americans moved to right-to-work states between 2000 and 2008.

The article said pay is higher in non-right-to-work states -- but, employing an economic model, Vedder estimated that right-to-work states saw economic growth increase 23 percent faster between 1977 and 2007 than non-right-to-work states.

Virginia Gov. Bob McDonnell, in an interview with Fox News on Monday, directly attributed Virginia's ease in balancing its budget to the fact that it is a right-to-work state.

"We're a right-to-work state, so I don't have a lot of the challenges that (Walker) has in Wisconsin," McDonnell said. Virginia is nevertheless considering a proposal to add a right-to-work provision into the state's constitution.

"Unlike in federal government, we've got to balance our budgets," McDonnell said.

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