



Virginia's quality of life is better thanks to its right-to-work law

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November 4, 2019

In what longtime observers of Virginia campaigns regard as a surprising development, large numbers of Democratic candidates for the state Senate and state House of Delegates in the Old Dominion's upcoming 2019 legislative elections are openly declaring that they favor the elimination of our 72-year-old right-to-work statute.

As Virginia Public Media, an NPR affiliate, reported early this month, a "majority of Democratic lawmakers polled by the Virginia Chamber of Commerce" on the compulsory-unionism issue this fall "say they oppose the state's right-to-work law." That law simply prohibits the termination of employees for refusal to join or bankroll a labor organization they may oppose.

And self-styled "moderates" who hold senior positions in the Virginia Democratic Party are now publicly signaling that they are on board with destroying Right-to-Work, as long as it isn't openly labeled as "repeal."

For example, on Oct. 16, House Minority Leader Richard Saslaw openly declared to Richmond radio talk show host John Fredericks that he would "probably" support "modifications." He is undoubtedly referring to an amendment to the right-to-work law that authorizes forced union fees as a condition of holding a job.

The stance of Virginia Democratic officeholders on right-to-work is important, because Democrat Ralph Northam already holds the governorship. Partisan control of both chambers of the state General Assembly, in which Republicans currently hold razor-thin majorities, is expected to switch over to Democrats.

The destruction of right-to-work, whether overt or camouflaged, would be a disastrous outcome for the Old Dominion for several reasons. The most important is that it is wrong to force employees to bankroll a union if they choose not to belong to it. After all, as even pro-Big Labor coercion law professor Sheldon Leader has admitted, under union monopoly bargaining, workers who don't want a union are "often actually made worse off" than they were before.

Elimination of right-to-work protections for employees would also lead to lower living standards for Virginians from all walks of life. Nationwide, the average cost of living-adjusted, after-tax income per household in the 27 Right to Work states last year was \$60,806. That's nearly \$4,300 higher than the average for households in the 23 states where workers can be forced to pay fees to labor unions for the privilege of keeping their jobs.

Eight of the nine lowest-ranking states for real, disposable income per household lack right-to-work laws. But the four highest-ranking states are all right-to-work states. Virginia's cost of living-adjusted, after-tax average household income of \$70,184 is the highest in the country, and more than \$13,600 higher than the combined average for forced-unionism states.

Handing expanded monopoly privileges to union officials in Virginia could also reasonably be expected to cause the quality of vital public services in the state to deteriorate. A 2018 policy analysis for the Cato Institute coauthored by Texas economist Stan Liebowitz and research fellow Matthew Kelly, which controlled for demographic differences among the states to make "apples-to-apples" state comparisons, found that monopolistic unions "are negatively related to student performance" in public schools. Liebowitz and Kelly found that seven of the top 10 states for educational quality are right-to-work states, and ranked Virginia first in the country.

The two scholars also investigated how well ethnically and racially diverse students do relative to how much schools spend in cost of living-adjusted dollars. They found that all of the nine highest-ranking states in this metric of educational efficiency have been protecting educators' right to work for more than two decades, and that eight of these states have comprehensive right-to-work laws. Based on the "bang" taxpayers get for their education buck, Virginia ranks third in the nation. Only right-to-work Florida and Texas do better.

The fact that living standards and government services in Virginia are comparatively good doesn't mean things are perfect here, or that we couldn't do better, of course. But the reinstatement of Big Labor bosses' forced-unionism privileges, seven decades after our elected representatives had the good sense to take them away, is the last thing Virginia needs.