



Written by [Bruce Walker](#) on August 26, 2011

Mich. Limits Public-employee Unions

Unsurprisingly, local government associations have criticized the measure. Ben Bodkin, legislative affairs director for the Michigan Association of Counties, commented:

The state has never been involved in negotiating our benefits before. We believe helping counties specifically with additional tools to help control their costs themselves are a good idea across the board, but we do not support mandates.



Also predictably, Michigan teachers are up in arms. Doug Pratt of the Michigan Education Association contended,

The simple fact is that the Republican-led Legislature has put a target on the backs of public workers, school employees in particular. This is just another phase of the attacks that they're waging against the middle class of this state.

Republican leaders in state government, however, are not backing down. Senate Majority Leader Randy Richardville noted of such a reform, "I guarantee there are a lot of hard-working, union, blue-collar men and women out there in the field right now that would love to pay 20 percent because they're paying considerably more." Despite the objections of unions, Michigan Governor Rick Snyder is expected to sign the bill; such a move is in keeping with his plans to limit local governments' contracts with unions, especially in the areas of pensions and healthcare — costs which have been skyrocketing nationally.

Snyder has pursued a conciliatory approach with unions, asking them to work with him to "re-invent" the economy of Michigan. The latest Bureau of Labor Statistics shows that unemployment in Michigan is the fourth highest in the nation, exceeded only by California, Nevada, and South Carolina. The unemployed in Michigan are, by and large, not paying union dues.

The 2010 elections left Republicans in complete control of a number of state governments that had previously been controlled by Democrats or in which control was split between the two political parties — including Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, and Wisconsin. In these "Rust Belt" states — an area extending roughly from Wisconsin to New Jersey — the power of labor unions was so strong that in the past Republicans had preferred to behave passively rather than risk energizing labor unions in elections.

Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, supported by a solid Republican caucus in both houses of the state legislature, enacted reforms that removed the benefits package from collective bargaining with public-employees unions. His reforms were intended, in part, to prevent the massive layoff of teachers, and the plan appears to have worked reasonably well. The nation will not soon forget the fierce and massive union protests that ensued, attempting to intimidate Republican legislators. Labor and its ideological allies lost their bitter struggle to defeat Wisconsin Supreme Court Justice David Prosser, presumed to



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favor upholding the reform, in the sort of election that in the past had been considered unimportant. Big labor was also unsuccessful in its attempt to recall enough Republicans in the state Senate to flip control of that body to Democrats.

Other states have moved to limit union power, particularly public-employees unions, including Florida, Idaho, Oklahoma, Arizona, and Tennessee. The restrictions vary from state to state. Tennessee, for example, ended the requirement that a union member must continue to pay his dues for the life of the collective bargaining contract even if that employee is out of work. These states are among the 22 that already have right-to-work laws. Union membership in these states is also below the national average of 11.2 percent. Florida's union membership rate is 6.9 percent, Idaho's 8.6 percent, Oklahoma's 6.9 percent, Arizona's 8.1 percent, and Tennessee's 5.8 percent.

Limiting union power in states such as Wisconsin, Indiana, Ohio, and Michigan is harder because organized labor reaches many more voters. In Wisconsin, 15.1 percent of workers belong to a union; in Ohio the figure is 14.7 percent, and in Michigan, 17.3 percent. Standing up to organized labor in states such as Michigan and Wisconsin requires immense political courage. The long-term consequences for the nation in limiting organized labor are profound, and analysts say that if the battle is to be won, it must be fought and won in the heartland of labor power.



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