



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on October 5, 2011

## Michigan GOP Lawmakers Pursue Right-to-Work Legislation

GOP lawmakers in Michigan, the birthplace of the American labor movement, are pursuing historic legislation that would make theirs the 23rd state to finalize a “right-to-work” law. But could the state that harbors both the United Auto Workers and the Michigan Education Association really pass a law prohibiting unions from regulating dues and compelling membership in closed-shop work environments? With the GOP now in control of the state legislature and a Republican Governor at the helm, observers are predicting that the measure is indeed entirely possible.



The last time a right-to-work bill was proposed by Michigan legislators was in 2008, but it was quickly muffled, as Democrat Jennifer Granholm held the governorship and Democrats enjoyed firmer pull in the legislature. But because the party gap in the state legislature has now widened in the GOPs favor and a Republican is now Governor, right-to-work advocates are anticipating a dramatic shift in political authority.

Michigan Governor Rick Snyder (above) has stated that his agenda is not to promote right-to-work status; however, analysts believe state lawmakers could still push through a bill without public support from Snyder.

“Weve got growing and substantial support in the Legislature for pursuing Michigan becoming a right-to-work state, but this is a marathon, not a sprint, and its all about making sure we are removing all obstacles to jobs,” [asserted](#) GOP State Rep. Mike Shirkey. While emphasizing that he is not anti-union, Shirkey said that he supports “labor freedom, where unions are as free to make their case as workers are to make their choice.”

Although Republicans now dominate Michigans political system, intervening in the states union affairs will be a lofty challenge, as union influence has strong political and corporate pull, being heavily bound to the Big Three automakers General Motors, Ford, and Chrysler and other corporations such as Whirlpool, Delphi, and Johnson Controls.

Predictably, prominent union leaders and Michigan Democrats are exhibiting staunch opposition to right-to-work legislation, accusing Republicans of trying to subvert all collective bargaining practices much like the vilification of Governor Scott Walker in Wisconsin. “Michigans middle-class workers have been forced to endure continued attacks from our Republican leaders throughout 2011 and these so-called right-to-work proposals are simply the latest in that misguided effort,” challenged Senate Minority Leader Gretchen Whitmer. “Instead of focusing on creating jobs, Republicans now want to pass this bad policy that would lead to lower wages and fewer benefits for those already struggling to make ends meet.”



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Many right-to-work opponents in the state point to a [report](#). “Right to work: The wrong answer for Michigans economy” commissioned last year by Booth Newspapers and published by the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), which claims that if Michigan had embraced right-to-work status in the 1960s, the state could have up to 60,000 more auto-related jobs, but the workers would be paid much less than they are today. Political economist Gordon Lafer, who endorsed the study, stated that right-to-work laws “lower wages for union and non-union workers by an average of \$1,500 a year and decrease the likelihood employees will get health insurance or pensions through their jobs.”

Others have countered with opposing studies on the issue. According to the [Washington Times](#):

Right-to-work backers point to new research that finds private-sector total compensation for workers rose an average of 11.8 percent in right-to-work state in the previous decade nine times the rate compared to what the National Right to Work Committee calls “forced unionism” states.

The Virginia-based group also cited data from the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center that found the average cost of living in states without right-to-work laws in 2010 was close to 19 percent higher than in states that had them.

Rep. Shirkey and others also [cited](#) studies which reveal that job growth in the 22 states with right-to-work laws surpassed job growth in union states. Further, Shirkey recounted data showing that union jobs themselves in right-to-work states have outpaced union job growth in non-right-to-work states. The Michigan lawmaker requested that the state legislature at least conduct a review on the issue. “It doesnt have to be contentious,” he affirmed.

Another study, headed by Grand Valley State University economist Hari Singh, [found](#) that if Michigan had been a right-to-work state, the auto industry would have amassed a 25-percent surplus in jobs since 1965. Instead, its labor force shrank by 165,777, a 56.6 percent plunge just between 2002 and 2009. In a normally functioning labor market, rising unemployment leads to lower wages; however, under Michigans unionized job climate, Singh found that wages actually spiked 18.1 percent during that same period while, of course, more and more workers lost their jobs.

Many right-to-work proponents point to Michigans relentlessly high unemployment rate. After all, they ask, if the state champions labor and “workers rights” so adamantly, why are the people of Michigan so desperate to find work? Further, why are so many people fleeing the state? Reason.com expounded on the conundrum:

Since jobs cant come to Michigan, Michigan residents have followed the jobs. Michigan lost 11.7 percent of its 25-34 age group between 1993 and 2003 while right-to-work states gained 3.8 percent. Indeed, the 2009 Census revealed that Michigan had experienced the third-highest emigration in the country. Otherwise, Michigans unemployment situation would be even grimmer.

But beyond all the research that pushes for and against right-to-work legislation, the freedom aspect cannot be discounted. Should Big Labor have the authority to abuse their power by ingratiating their members with high wages and benefits, while bypassing the rights of employers and non-union employees? Should Americas labor force be compensated based on an arbitrary membership card, or by their merits as competent and effective laborers?

Although Gov. Snyder may be hesitant to embrace legislation which will stir political contention, many argue that a silent nod may be all it takes to grant freedom to Michigans labor force.



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