

Right to work -- Give workforce a helping hand before enacting legislation that divides us

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Right to work legislation is racing through the statehouse toward Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin's desk with more than its fair share of deliberate speed. In fact, we're not sure there's been much deliberation at all.

Why are the Republicans in such a hurry to get this particular piece of legislation passed?

The bill, called "Workplace Freedom" by Republicans, is part of the GOP's policy agenda to create a better business climate in the state. The right to work law would mean employers could not require union membership at their businesses and unions would not be able to collect union dues from those workers. Non-union workers would be protected by the union and receive the same union benefits that union negotiators bargained for their membership.

On the face of it, a right to work law sounds like good policy. No worker should be required or coerced to join any group. And that is, essentially, what the 1947 Taft-Hartley Act did, outlawing closed shops where an employer could only hire labor union members.

Right to work also looks like a bill that would cause a further erosion in union membership rolls. Why pay dues when you can get the same negotiated salary and benefits package without joining the union?

So why right to work? Well, 25 states have passed their own version of the law. It is a diverse collection of states, from Alabama and Mississippi in the deep South to Indiana, Iowa and Nebraska in the Midwest, from Michigan and its auto industry to the mountain west states of Wyoming and Utah.

With such a varied representative list of states, it's difficult to draw any concrete conclusions about the law's effect – especially in terms of its economic impact. Mississippi had the law added to its state constitution in 1960 and, well, the Mississippi economy is not something you'd brag about. At the same time, unemployment has decreased in Michigan since the law's passage in 2013. But unemployment has been falling in Michigan since late 2009.

Proponents of the law also say it helps attract business. Maybe. But we note that Proctor and Gamble chose West Virginia to build a \$500 million manufacturing hub in the Eastern Panhandle not because it had a right to work law on the books but because it had the land and — as a good Realtor would remind us — location, location, location. The plant at Tabler Station provided relatively swift access to 80 percent of its East Coast customers. The Macy's distribution center, located in Berkley County in 2012, had easy access to Interstate 81 and the central Mid-Atlantic region. Again, land and access spelled success.

So, we have some evidence that our Mountain State can attract business — big businesses — without right to work conditions.

What concerns us is that so much time is being taken up in the session with the kind of legislation that doesn't seem to have proof in the pudding. As Register-Herald reporter Pam Pritt wrote in a story in this past Sunday's paper, "The trouble with researching the effects of right to work laws is that the great glut of research is funded by either conservative business groups or union supporters. They get what they pay for."

If this legislature is so bent on creating a better environment for business, we'd suggest they take a look at "human capital" — in short, the workforce, our people. What is their educational attainment, their health, their skills and their ability to work drug free? Can we address real issues standing at our doorstep or should we create a feud within the family, pitting labor against business? It seems so unnecessary.

Let us be clear: We are all for an improved business climate, but instead of pushing through a piece of legislation with dubious returns, we would prefer we give the workforce a helping hand — with drug addiction treatment, with training, with education.

Let's build up one another and stop trying to divide.