
Madeline Young: Right-to-work an insult to W.Va. workers (Gazette)

By Madeline Young

So-called “right-to-work” legislation passed by the Legislature is a disgrace to the West Virginia way of life and an insult to every hard-working blue-collar worker and middle-class family in the state.

The first problem with this law is the misleading title which gives the impression that unionized workplaces do not allow non-union workers to work on the same premises. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Taft-Hartley Act was passed in 1947 as an amendment to the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. This ended the era of “closed shops” in America, making it illegal for a business to fire someone over failure to join a union. However, beyond that, the law required that any agreements negotiated between the union and the business must be extended to apply to non-union workers. If a worker chooses to stay unaffiliated with the union, he or she is obligated to pay for costs incurred for contract negotiations and representation should a grievance be brought about. These “agency fees” cannot be used for political activity or employee organization fees, and this principle has been upheld in U.S. courts.

Right-to-work laws attempt to eliminate the “agency fees” while still allowing non-union members to reap benefits of union contracts and representation. This blatantly unfair situation is a slap in the face to every union member who has faithfully paid union dues for years for retirement and job security. Now those who do not pay union dues will greedily leech and use the system without paying. This flawed logic is evident, and the only freedom that workers gain from right-to-work laws are to earn something from nothing — an idea that inherently clashes with the American dream and American morals.

Senate President Bill Cole, a leading sponsor of right-to-work in West Virginia, requested a study costing \$34,000 to be conducted by West Virginia University determining the economic impact the law would have in our state. Supporters relied heavily on this study as evidence to push the law through the Legislature. However, details of how the study was conducted and specific results have been kept carefully under wraps. Blacked-out emails were released, although their content was carefully edited. If the study proves so strongly that right-to-work would benefit West Virginia, it is difficult to understand why entire emails would be blacked out, increasing suspicion of this study and bringing to question just how beneficial right-to-work would be for West Virginia.

Moreover, most statistics prove that right-to-work has a negative impact on the economy and workers. In Oklahoma, companies relocated out of the state and there was no positive impact on job growth when right-to-work laws were enacted. A study by the Economic Policy Institute determined that right-to-work laws lower wages for everyone, union member or not, by about \$1,500 a year, and weaken unions, giving them less strength to negotiate contracts with greedy business owners who put company profits in front of human welfare. Many families are struggling to get by as it stands, much less with cut wages. Repercussions of right-to-work laws are further evidenced by the fact that right-to-work states have some of the highest poverty rates in the United States. Additionally, the Bureau of Labor Statistics shows right-to-work states have higher numbers of workplace deaths, indicating a more

dangerous workplace. Of the top 11 states with the worst unemployment rates, over half, seven to be exact, are right-to-work states. Studies have also shown that technology companies, who provide good paying jobs well into the future, prefer states with strong labor unions as this indicates a high population of skilled workers that are more likely to remain committed to the company, therefore decreasing turnover.

Right-to-work legislation does nothing to benefit the working middle-class family and is rather a thinly veiled attempt for big business owners to reap increased profit without regard for their worker's safety or living conditions. Rather than destroying unions that protect workers' rights in the name of supposed economic development, West Virginia should focus on retraining workers from the failing coal industry and look for economic opportunities in technological fields to fuel success for the future.

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