

'Right to work' belongs in quotation marks

By Misty Poe Times West Virginian | Posted: Sunday, January 24, 2016 3:45 am

I am pleased about one aspect of the “right to work” bill that passed late last week.

It's that “right to work” is always placed in quotation marks. I imagine someone saying the words “right to work” and using their fingers to make those obnoxious quotation marks in the air.

Sometimes when you use quotation marks, it's an obvious attempt to immediately say in a nonverbal way “these are not my words; they are someone else's.” And they are someone else's words.

This bill doesn't give anyone the right to work. This bill gives companies the ability to bust up a union one member at a time.

What this proposed law will do is decrease the wages of employees in traditional union trades — on average of \$5,500 — as well as decrease workplace safety.

Lawmakers in favor of the bill have called union members “free riders,” but the reality is that if passed and if it becomes law, the free riders will be the people who choose not to pay union fees but who take advantage of the wages, the benefits, the vacation and sick days, and the protection that the union offers its employees against unfair treatment.

And with fewer dues-paying members, unions will have to cut back on expenses and services available to employees.

I really do think this is a case where history is being forgotten and we're doomed to repeat it should this law pass.

We are a union state, one that was built brick by brick by the employees who believed that they had the right to a fair wage, a safe workplace and job protection. These workers fought for those things, backed by the unions, not just for themselves but for generations to come.

“If it weren't for unions, I really do believe coal miners would be living in company houses and shopping at company stores,” Delegate Mike Caputo, D-Marion, told me the other day as we talked about the proposed law.

Caputo is also an international vice president for the United Mine Workers of America.

“Take a coal mine as an example. People say non-union mines still have the same safety laws. Yeah they do, and it's really sad that they can't enforce them as well at a non-union mine as they can at a union mine,” Caputo explained, adding that union members at mines are trained in ways of immediately recognizing safety violations and exactly what to do to report those violations to protect

themselves and all of their fellow employees.

“When you don’t have that voice at the mine it becomes ‘production, production, production’ and then everything else comes second,” he said.

But then we don’t need unions, right? Just ask the 29 families who still grieve after nearly six years after the explosion at the Upper Big Branch Mine. Ask them if they would still be grieving if that mine were represented by a union, if its employees were specialized in mine safety laws and had not only the channel but the protection that comes with reporting those conditions.

There is no definitive answer to that question, but who could deny that production was put before workplace safety? A criminal jury agreed with that sentiment.

“I’ve been a union member since I learned what the word was,” Caputo said. “Ever since my brother and I were children, we understood that we wouldn’t have anything without the union organizing. We knew the company didn’t give us anything; it was the unions who fought and died for health care and wages. I don’t credit the coal companies for that. I credit the union.”

This proposed law, passed right along the party lines in the Senate, will more than likely pass in the House of Delegates because of the makeup of the membership.

It’s being touted as a law that will benefit all workers and bring more businesses to the state. And when you get right down to it, only 8 percent of this state is unionized. So, really, how much of an impact will this actually have on businesses? Probably not as much of an impact as it would for skilled laborers.

Everybody has the right to work. They also have the right to come home to their families each night safe because their lives are valued over slightly increasing margins by sacrificing safety standards.

This “right to work” bill doesn’t offer that.

Misty Poe is the general manager/editor of the Times West Virginian and can be reached by phone at 304-367-2523, by email at mpoe@timeswv.com or on Twitter [@MistyPoeTWV](https://twitter.com/MistyPoeTWV).