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Mackinac Center: Don't force workers into unwanted union representation

By **F. Vincent Vernuccio**

Detroit Free Press guest writer

Many opponents of right-to-work in Michigan try to portray it as an either/or issue. Either unions have to represent workers who are not paying them, or workers are forced to accept and pay for unwanted representation. But the truth is, Michigan can have its cake and eat it, too.

Union supporters derogatorily call workers who do not wish to receive an unwanted service “free-riders.” Michigan House Minority Leader Tim Greimel, D-Auburn Hills, has gone so far as to call right-to-work “the freedom to free load.”

Such insulting rhetoric makes it seem as if unions are the victims of workers who want to steal their services. This line of thinking, however, has two major flaws: that workers who do not want to be associated with a union and would like to represent themselves do not have that option, and that unions have historically wanted to represent all workers because it increases their bargaining power.

In almost all cases, unions bargain to be the exclusive representative for all workers at a work site. This means that if an employee is working under a union contract, they are forced to accept union representation whether they want it or not.

A worker in a unionized job, even if they are exercising their freedom under Michigan's new right-to-work law, cannot negotiate hours, wages or benefits with their employer. They have to accept whatever deal the union reaches. It also means that in many cases, if this worker has a problem, they cannot approach their boss directly but must use the union as a go-between.

Terry Bowman, a UAW member and president of Union Conservatives, says there is a better term for this kind of worker: a “forced rider.”



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Recently, David Hecker, president of the American Federation of Teachers-Michigan, responded to the possibility that a bill eliminating exclusive representation for public-sector workers could be introduced. Hecker said he wanted to keep exclusivity clauses “because we care about all working people.” He also noted that, “When there are some who stop paying dues, we still care about them, and we want working people treated right.”

What the president of Michigan's second largest teachers union did not say is that he wants to represent all employees because it gives him a stronger hand in contract negotiations.

Members-only agreements are rare. However, the concept of unions representing only those who want to be represented and are willing to pay is sound. Michigan cannot change decisions by the National Labor Relations Board with regard to private-sector workers, but through a state statute it can change the system for Michigan's public employees.

Right-to-work opponents are maintaining that “free-riding” is unfair. But their answer should not be to return to an even more unfair system — a system where neither providing nor receiving a service is voluntary. The answer is to give workers the ability to say, “No thanks” and unions the ability to say, “Good-bye.”

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