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WITH SOLID BACKING FROM G.O.P. VOTERS, STATE FAVORS RIGHT-TO-WORK LAW

Voters in Michigan, which was a national pioneer in organized labor and continues as a union bastion, favor a right-to-work by a slight majority, a poll conducted for *Gongwer News Service* shows. The issue has quietly simmered for years without any serious move to enact it, but public debate has been on the rise as Michigan's economy fell and it lost thousands of manufacturing jobs.

The poll conducted by Lansing's EPIC/MRA found 53-35 percent support for a right-to-work law in Michigan, with support increasing to 57-34 percent when respondents were given more information about the issue.

Support was by far the strongest among Republicans: a 69-22 percent advantage in the initial response and rising to 73-22 percent support in the second question. It was weakest among Democrats (39-50 percent against and evenly divided at 45 percent when given more information) while it garnered backing from independents of 48-31 percent and 50-32 percent.

Among union members, the issue was opposed by a 30-61 percent margin, with support rising to 34-60 percent after more information was given. In general right-to-work is favored more strongly among younger age groups, those with more income and those with higher levels of formal education.

EPIC/MRA vice president Ed Sarpolus said he was surprised by the level of support for a right-to-work law - whereby workers at unionized companies are not required to become union members - but added the fractured support for the issue suggests it is not yet politically viable in part because the Democratic base is not ready to support the change.

"There is an openness to the right-to-work issue and if that number rose any higher, you would see movement in the Legislature," Mr. Sarpolus said. "But it's not going to happen under Granholm's watch. This is a great issue for Republicans."

Republican Party Chair Betsy DeVos touched off the most recent attention to the issue with comments in an April story about her assessment of the state's economic troubles. Expanding on a statement that high wages and a burdensome tax and regulatory climate impede Michigan's growth, Ms. DeVos said right-to-work laws must be considered in the economic debate.

Republican Party spokesperson Matt Davis said the poll does show the importance of including the right-to-work issue in discussions about the state's economy. "It's important to have a mature discussion of Michigan's future and its competitiveness," he said. "This indicates that Michigan citizens want to have this discussion."

If the debate is not as wide-ranging as possible without "crassly political" attacks, he said, "We're all going to be the worse for it."

In the *Grand Rapids Press* story, Ms. DeVos had said, "States with right-to-work environments have an advantage in attracting new jobs."

Former Republican Governor John Engler, after winning his second term in 1994, which also marked a historic shift to Republican control of both houses of the Legislature, had deflected moves for right-to-work status and said as recently as two years ago it was not something on his agenda.

Democratic Party Executive Chair Mark Brewer, who said the party would always oppose right-to-work laws regardless of poll data, said this poll did not inform voters of lower wages and benefits workers get in right-to-work states.

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“Unless economic data is included, the question is one-sided,” he said of descriptions he found to be too legalistic. If respondents had been better informed of the full relationship between a union and its members, including gaining non-economic benefits such as arbitrary dismissal and workplace protections, “I think you would find dramatically different results,” Mr. Brewer said.

Joe Lehman, executive vice president of the free-market think tank Mackinac Center in Midland, which supports right-to-work laws, said the numbers indicate the time is drawing near for Michigan to go the way of 23 other states in adopting right-to-work status.

“When you tell people that there is such a thing as freedom from compulsory unionism, they respond to that,” he said. “Americans pretty uniformly object to compulsory membership in anything.”

Mr. Lehman said ideally government would neither squelch nor mandate union membership, adding, “Michigan is behind those states with a more voluntary approach. It’s only a matter of time before competitive pressure and simple justice will require Michigan to become a right-to-work state.”

Mr. Lehman said arguments about lower compensation in states with right-to-work laws are offset by generally lower cost of living rates in those states.

But Mr. Brewer said the cost of living differential never approaches the difference in average worker compensation between right-to-work and non-right-to-work states. “Many of us who oppose such laws say it’s the right-to-work for less.”

Statistics for 2001 from the U.S. Bureau of Labor show workers earned \$5,333 less in right-to-work states than workers in union environments.

Mr. Sarpolus also said the data shows a difference between older workers and younger ones, many of whom view unions as impediments to finding jobs and moving up the ladder, and that corporate leaders in Michigan have done a good job in defusing demands for unions even in nonunion workplaces by the levels of pay and benefits they have provided.

He added that while the issue is currently “beatable” if it were placed on the ballot, “Labor has a lot of work to do if they want to be players. They’ve not done a good job getting their message out.”

Officials at the Michigan State AFL-CIO did not comment on the poll.

The poll question and its follow-up question were:

Currently, 23 states have right-to-work laws, which means that workers cannot be required to join a union or pay the dues or fees that union members pay to the union, if the company is unionized. Based on what you may know about states with right-to-work laws compared to states such as Michigan that requires union membership at a company that is unionized, would you favor or oppose a proposal to change the laws in Michigan to make it a right-to-work state?

Opponents of right-to-work laws say that such laws are unfair because workers can decide not to join the union and not have to pay dues or fees but they get the full benefit of what the union negotiates for their members, and if a worker is a union member and decides to quit the union, they not only continue to receive the union negotiated wages and benefits, but the union must continue to represent them with any grievances. Knowing this, let me ask you again -- would you favor or oppose a proposal to change the laws in Michigan to make it a right-to-work state?

[Click here](#) for responses to the questions by 600 active voters; [Click here](#) to view the complete poll results and cross tabs. The poll, conducted June 2-6, has an error margin of plus/minus 4 percentage points.