

Detroit Free Press

The right to work for more

BY LAWRENCE W. REED

Freedom of choice in the labor market: To some, that's a concept as American as baseball and apple pie. To others, it means right-to-work and a serious threat to unions.

Michigan is overdue for a thoughtful consideration of fundamental labor law. Should workers be compelled to join a labor union to hold their jobs?

Since 1947, when Congress passed the Taft-Hartley Act, 21 states have exercised the right-to-work option by making it illegal for union membership to be a condition of employment. Michigan retains its status as a compulsory-unionism state, but more because of inertia, misconceptions and fear of controversy than because of any genuine public discussion.

Such discussion must begin with recognition of an important fact: Workers already exercise a surprising degree of choice. Increasingly, they choose to work in nonunion settings.

From a high of nearly 40 percent in the 1950s, the percentage of American workers who are union members has fallen to barely 16 percent. Factor out government workers, and the figure is just 10.3 percent of the private-sector work force.

This trend is evident in Michigan, where unionized employees make up 25 percent of all workers and 19 percent of those in the private sector — half the figures of 1960. The UAW, which boasted 1.5 million members at its peak 30 years ago, now counts fewer than 800,000.

Much change has occurred in the labor market since 1960, some of it because of unions themselves. A wide range of legal protections and social benefits has rendered obsolete the once-popular union caricature of the helpless worker at the mercy of the heartless employer.

Arguably, some of those protections and benefits have produced costs and problems of their own. But their existence makes it even harder to persuade workers that they need unions to help them.

More important, the nature of work itself is being transformed — away from monotonous assembly-line jobs that invite union intervention, and toward more independent, flexible, creative and individualistic work that makes anachronisms of punch clocks and picket lines.

And in recent weeks, the violence employed by striking workers at Detroit's two daily newspapers probably has reinforced a widespread public feeling that unions are dinosaurs on the road to a noisy extinction.

Still, Michigan never will become a

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Free Press file photo

right-to-work state if people think it would cause a decline in living standards. As one saying goes, right-to-work means the "right to work for less."

But 75 percent of the people who work in Michigan pay no dues to any union, work for themselves or bargain individually with employers, and manage for the most part to do rather well. That should at least raise a few questions about this old canard.

Studies that purport to show higher wages in the 29 compulsory-unionism states, including Michigan, are being discredited by more recent and detailed analyses that account for differences in the cost of living.

Economist James Bennett of George Mason University in Virginia has shown that residents of central cities and surrounding suburbs in states without right-to-work laws pay 24.5 percent *more* for food, housing, health care, transportation, utilities, property taxes and college tuition than do residents of similar areas in right-to-work states.

Adjusting for the cost of living, in-

cluding lower taxes, families in the 21 right-to-work states actually earn \$2,852 more in real income per year than their counterparts in states without right-to-work laws. And that gap today is double what it was in 1987.

Reporting in the *Journal of Economic Literature* on his extensive research into the effects of unions on wages, C.J. Parsley concluded that high wages attract union organizing, not the other way around.

States with right-to-work laws are leading the country in economic growth. Between 1960 and 1993, the number of manufacturing jobs in those states rose by 77 percent, far in excess of other states. Since Idaho became the 21st right-to-work state by a decisive vote of its citizens in 1986, its economy has gone from being a chronic laggard to being among the top half-dozen leaders in the nation every year.

Experience is pointing strongly in one direction: Right-to-work really means the right to work for more — more individual freedom, more jobs and more income in real terms.

It is not anti-union; it is purely and simply pro-choice. The only thing unions have to fear from right-to-work is the free choice of the very workers union leaders say they are in business to help.

If Michigan remains wedded to the past while the world around it becomes increasingly competitive, with workers enjoying new freedoms, let it not be because we closed our eyes to the evidence and refused to think.

Lawrence W. Reed is president of the Midland-based Mackinac Center for Public Policy.

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FROM OUR READERS

Give workers choice not to join unions

I commend Lawrence Reed for his forthright and accurate discussion of right-to-work laws from the perspective of individual liberty and improved overall economic conditions ("The right to work for more," Dec. 6).

Right-to-work laws are consistent with American constitutional principles and our heritage of freedom. In the 29 states that have not enacted these laws, union membership can be mandated as a condition of employment. This is manifestly unjust.

The right of individuals to join labor unions in right-to-work states is just as guaranteed as the right to refrain from joining. Each person should have the prerogative either to affiliate or not to affiliate with any private organization.

John M. Pafford
Midland

Give employees the right to choose

It's time for Michigan to give back to employees the right to choose to join a union. A person should not be forced to join a union to have a job.

Jerome Kohel
Richland

Laws may be hurting Michigan

Lawrence Reed's op-ed column should force Michigan legislators to consider whether jobs are leaving this state because other states have exercised their right-to-work option.

As we have seen with the collapse of the Soviet Union, careful attention must be paid to ensuring that those in business have flexibility in their decision-making. Failure to allow such flexibility may condemn unions and states without right-to-work laws to the same fate that befell the Soviet Union.

Stephen Safranek
Grosse Pointe Park

Labor unions will be far more effective and credible when their members choose to join freely, rather than under coercion.

Free to join or not

Many people would be outraged if they were forced to join a political party whose views they did not share, or a church whose beliefs conflicted with their own. Why is it any different with labor unions?

Lawrence Reed made an excellent case for freedom of conscience in the workplace. Why should anyone be forced

to join an organization merely to pursue his or her career or profession?

This is not anti-union sentiment. Labor unions will be far more effective and credible when their members choose to join freely, rather than under coercion.

Raymond H. Wilson
Kalamazoo

A matter of judgment

Lawrence Reed clearly stated why Michigan workers should not be forced to join a union to get or hold a job.

I see no justification for forcing people to pay dues to an organization that may act against their best interests, and even has the power to punish them for following their own judgment.

If workers approve of a union's policies, they will join and pay dues voluntarily. Disapproval should not bar them from employment.

James M. Rodney
Birmingham

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AN INDEPENDENT NEWSPAPER
321 W. Lafayette, Detroit, Mich. 48226
(313) 222-6400



A Knight-Ridder Newspaper

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