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Michigan Workers Set Free

By **STEPHEN MOORE**

Michigan officially became America's 24th Right to Work (RTW) state last week when an RTW law—passed by the Republican legislature back in December amidst fierce union opposition in Lansing—went into effect. “It was always pure and simple about recruiting more businesses and jobs to Michigan,” state Senator Arlan Meekhof, the primary sponsor of the legislation told me in an interview last week. He sees the issue of one of workers’ rights, and he calls the bill “freedom to work.”

RTW laws don’t abolish unions. But they allow every worker to join or not join the union and pay dues. For that reason labor bosses are still fighting feverishly to overturn the law. They have launched several legal challenges to get the courts to invalidate it and are considering a ballot initiative for 2014 that would try to get a majority of voters to repeal it. Some protest groups have also threatened to disclose names and addresses of workers who do not join the union shop—an old-fashioned intimidation tactic.

Unions have also launched end runs around the law by locking workers into long term contracts. Normal teacher contracts are for about three years. But several school districts have been racing to sign contracts for eight to 10 years. As Charlie Owens, the head of the state’s National Federation of Independent Business wrote in the Detroit News last month: “One only need examine Michigan’s Right to Work law to discover why 10-year school con-

tracts are now all the rage.” The unions, he wrote, “are amazingly motivated to sign onto anything just short of eternity to avoid giving their members the right to choose to pay dues.”

The Mackinac Center Legal Foundation, based in Midland Michigan, has filed a lawsuit on behalf of three teachers against the Taylor school district, its board of education and the Taylor Federation of Teachers for the 10-year extension. If the extension is successfully imposed it will force employees to financially support the union even under the new RTW law.

Meanwhile many in the private sector believe that the new law could be a boon to the state economy. Michigan already has moved up in the ALEC index of state competitiveness recently thanks, according to the Mackinac Center, to tax and regulatory reforms under Gov. Rick Snyder who took office in 2011. Chevrolet announced in December that it intends to move its plant for assembling Camaros back to Michigan from Canada. Implementation of the new law could spur further progress. The state that was once the car capital of the world still has a long way to go, but RTW may put Michigan back in the game.

The big issue is whether RTW will stick in Michigan. Right now polls show voters evenly divided on the new law. Senator Meekhof told me, “our members are holding firm. There aren’t any members who want to reverse their vote despite the union tactics.”