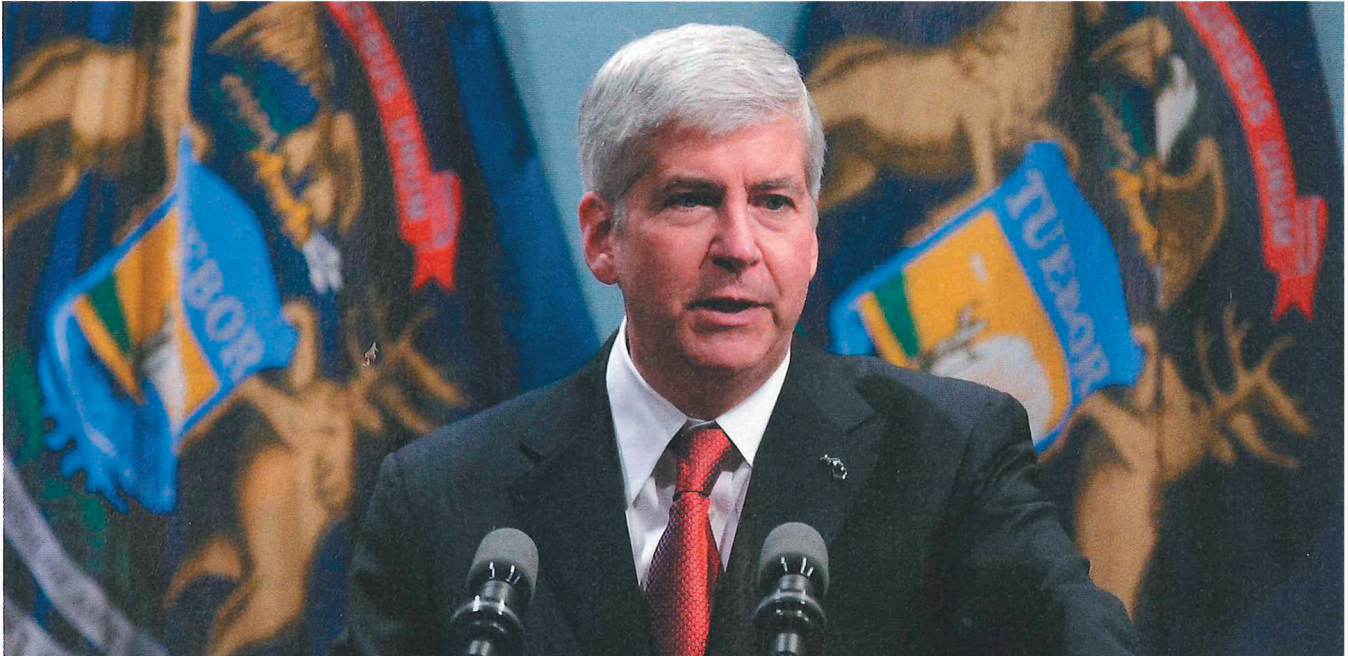


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Gov. Rick Snyder speaks at a news conference in Lansing, Mich. Democrats, the party out of power, remain bitter about a legislative landslide in the final working days of 2012 that included right-to-work legislation transforming labor bastion Michigan into the nation's 24th right-to-work state. However, unions are working to circumvent the law, and hold on to some of their financial and political clout in the process. (AP Photo/Paul Sancya)

Worker Freedom in Michigan: The Road Ahead

By F. Vincent Vernuccio

The most heavily unionized state in the country finally passed right-to-work legislation, but the fight for workers' rights is still far from over.

It's been five months since Michigan joined the ranks of 23 other right-to-work states, putting workers and job creators above special interests.

Thanks to the legislation, which Gov. Rick Snyder signed on Dec. 11, 2012, unions can no longer have workers fired for refusing to financially support them. With that one restriction, workers and unions can still collectively bargain over all the same subjects as they always have.

Nevertheless, the move to worker freedom has been confusing to say the least. Some workers were able to exercise their rights as soon as the new law took effect at the end of March. However, because the new legislation did not change any existing contracts, most union members must still wait for their current collective bargaining agreements to end or be modified before they gain the freedom of supporting a union or not.

Scared that their forced dues gravy train may soon come to an end, special interests have tried to delay worker freedom in Michigan as long as they can. Through lawsuits, intimidating letters and contract extensions, unions are attempting to extract every cent they can from workers who soon will have the ability to say, "No more."

In a letter to Michigan Education Association local presidents, board members and staff, MEA President Steven Cook said his



Union workers fill the Capitol rotunda in Lansing, Mich., Thursday, Dec. 6, 2012. Hundreds of chanting and cheering protesters created so much chaos that the building was temporarily closed to visitors. The pro-union crowd walked in as lawmakers were debating right-to-work legislation limiting union powers. The Republican-led House subsequently passed the bill with no Democratic support. (AP/Carlos Osorio)

union would use “any legal means at [its] disposal” against its own members to make sure the MEA collected all dues owed under contracts enacted before right-to-work went into effect.

Cook and some other union leaders were not content to simply ride out the forced dues in existing contracts. Some engaged in a mad rush to extend contracts before March 28—some for as long as 10 years—therefore delaying right-to-work.

In a Jan. 22 email, Cook told MEA members that his union’s “goal is to settle, extend or modify contracts with school districts so that locals are” as he euphemizes “protected from the law’s negative impacts.”

One of the most blatant examples of these special interests at play occurred in the Detroit suburb of Taylor. In early February, the teachers union and school board agreed to a new four-year contract that cut teacher pay by 10 percent. The two sides also signed a separate, 10-year agreement that locks teachers into paying union dues or agency fees until 2023.

In exchange for these 10-year restrictions, the only thing the teachers of Taylor received was the privilege of paying forced dues for the next decade.

Unfortunately, but not unsurprisingly, the memos, legal tactics and contract extensions focused on the continuation of forcing workers to pay dues instead of unions developing a strategy to show their value and convince members to voluntarily support them.

What the MEA and some of the other unions’ tactics against right-to-work shows is that deep down they worry they are delivering a product that their members simply do not want.

Yet, no matter how many delay tactics unions use to postpone right-to-work in Michigan, the wait will be worth it.

Workers in right-to-work states enjoy higher wage growth and, when cost of living is factored into the equation, better compensation than their counterparts in forced unionism states.

This may be another reason why unemployment is lower in right-to-work states and why these states generally have higher population growth.

Yet despite the economic benefits, unions will not sit idly by and wait for their current and extended contracts to expire. Likely they will attempt to repeal right-to-work on the ballot in November 2014.

Unions will have an uphill battle to defeat the law. Last November, Michigan voters overwhelmingly rejected union-sponsored ballot proposals which would have given government union contracts the ability to effectively veto laws and made right-to-work legislatively impossible. Voters rejected Proposal 2 by fifteen points.

It is no surprise that unions will use any means at their disposal to bring back their

forced dues monopoly. Protests outside the state capitol the day the bills were passed turned violent, and several lawsuits have been filed trying to delay the legislation.

In the meantime, there has been discussion about “outing” union members who dare to exercise their freedom, including intimidation tactics such as posting their names on bulletin boards in the workplace.

The road ahead for worker freedom will not be without difficulty, but after the dust settles and right-to-work has been solidified by the voters and the courts, Michigan will truly be a more free and prosperous state. •

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F. Vincent Vernuccio is director of labor policy at the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a research and educational institute headquartered in Midland, Mich. For more information, please see www.mackinac.org/rtw