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New Hampshire Flirts With Right-to-Work

Last week, the New Hampshire House of Representatives sent a shock wave through New England and North Atlantic states by passing Right-to-Work legislation by an overwhelming majority. New Hampshire's Senate—with its heavy majority of Republicans—is expected to approve the House bill. Whether both houses can override a promised veto by the Democrat Governor remains to be seen. If Republicans all stand firm it might happen. Just a handful of defections will enable the union movement to stave off what would be seen as a severely damaging opening salvo against their fortified stranglehold on lawmaking and policy in the northern states.

All the usual rhetoric about destroying worker rights will be trotted out in an attempt to defeat the bill. And as usual the rhetoric will be bogus and insulting. The right of a worker to choose whether he/she will join a union or pay union dues is as basic as any fundamental freedom any American has. Companies and workers ought to be able to mutually agree on employment and wages without coercion from the collective. But because of misguided and overreaching Supreme Court decisions decades ago that acquiesced in the assault on basic worker rights by allowing states to prohibit free choice regarding whether to join a union, there are now 28 states where workers at a unionized plant or government agency have no choice.

Thanks largely to Senator Everett Dirksen back in the 1940s, states were given the authority to adopt Right-to-Work legislation and 22 have done so. And these states have remained bulwarks of worker and economic freedom. Indeed, in state comparisons of economic freedom, Right-to-Work is the single best indicator of overall freedom because it captures so much of the general public's attitude toward the role of government in the economy.

Recently, union leaders were pushing to take away the secret ballot in elections to determine if employees wish to be represented by a collective bargaining unit by arguing that workers were being denied their rights. Even a man as liberal and pro-union as George McGovern could see through that preposterous argument. But denying employees the right to choose to join or not join a union as a condition of employment is just as vile a mugging of human liberty and dignity.

New Hampshire, as the state with the motto “Live Free or Die”, cannot in good conscience claim to adhere to that stirring sentiment as long as it denies workers freedom of choice in deciding to join a union or not. It is a mockery of their self-proclaimed devotion to liberty. By becoming the first New England state to adopt Right-to-Work, New Hampshire would become a bright beacon of freedom and make a very strong statement that it is truly open and welcoming to businesses. And after that they could consider the courageous stand being taken by Governor Walker in Wisconsin to rein in the power of public sector unions. There is little doubt that most government employees would choose to stay in their unions so Right-to-Work alone would have negligible impact on reducing government union power in New Hampshire. Another approach to that problem such as Governor Walker’s will be necessary.

Compare the New Hampshire Legislature’s move to enhance its reputation as a pro-business state with that of the recent actions of Allegheny County Council which used its not so valuable time to pass a resolution labeling a non-union steel plant a “sweatshop” primarily because it is non-union. Council happily went along with outrageous claims by unions and their allies to besmirch the company. Even though the resolution will be vetoed by the County Executive according to his spokesperson, County Council sent a very loud and very clear message to the world and particularly the business community; to wit: we are a wholly owned arm of the labor unions in Allegheny County. Couple this with last year’s enactment of a prevailing wage law and its consistent pro-union stance taken on policy matters, it is not hard to see why the County’s job growth over the past 20 years has been miniscule. And with Council acting the way it does, job gains will undoubtedly continue to lag far behind the nation.

Even if the Governor’s promised veto of Right-to-Work in New Hampshire is sustained, the large majority of votes for the bill in the Legislature will send a very clear signal regarding the beliefs of most New Hampshirites about the issue in the state. With a Republican governor in future years, Right-to-Work might well come to New Hampshire. Can Pennsylvania take hope from the bold legislative move in New Hampshire? Will there ever be a better opportunity?

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