

Foes' Sincerity on Collective Bargaining Reform Hollow

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Matt A. Mayer

ADVOCATES of collective-bargaining reform in Ohio, demonized by their opponents, deserve credit for fighting for the state's 8.5 million citizens who don't work for government or depend on a public paycheck. They took on Ohio's Goliath and won Round One.

But Round Two is just beginning. As they have threatened, unions plan to spend \$20 million to repeal the new law in a November referendum. Previous election trends suggest they will outspend any opposition to win.

The debate in the General Assembly over the new collective-bargaining law made one thing clear: The unions and their Statehouse allies never had any intent of supporting any changes to the law it replaced -- the most pro-union law in the nation.

If they did, why didn't then-Gov. Ted Strickland, when his party controlled the Ohio House, move to reform the law? He could have done so on his own terms, but didn't. In fact, if reform opponents truly believed that Ohio's previous collective-bargaining law needed changes, why did they make no effort since the law took effect in 1983 to amend it? Was there really no reform they were willing to make over the past 28 years?

They even opposed then-Gov. George Voinovich's fairly minor change to the law in 1995, when he proposed tweaking its definition of "inherent management rights"? It was far easier for these groups to talk about nebulous "reforms" needed to stop the new law than to propose any.

The fact that the union's Statehouse allies failed to offer a single amendment belies their claim that they really believed changes were needed. Offering amendments would have forced Republican lawmakers to consider them and improved the debate.

The fact is, unions and their allies don't think Ohio's collective-bargaining law needs any changes. So the only amendments they could have offered would have been to throw out the new law. That approach wouldn't have allowed them to pose as reformers, and would have revealed their sole aim: to preserve their power.

Just wait until the referendum language is drafted. See whether it repeals the new law lock, stock, and barrel, or only the "bad" parts. Believe what the opponents do, not what they say.

Unions funded flawed studies that tried to show government workers are underpaid compared to their private-sector peers. Actually, there is an easy way to find out exactly how much Ohio's public employees make, so a real comparison could involve all state and local government workers.

If all Ohio governments and school districts published their compensation package data on a Web site, researchers from the left and right could conduct thorough analyses. News media could determine fact from fiction.

But as with the "reforms" that never happened, opponents of the new collective-bargaining law have little interest in disseminating that information. Virtually every Web site that posts government salary data across the country is a center-right organization.

Why don't center-left groups, which claim a strong tradition of fighting for transparency, have searchable salary tools like ours on the Buckeye Institute Web site? Why do none of their "data" include actual information obtained under public-records law from Ohio governments?

You don't think citizens are interested in such data? In just 11 months, our Web site has attracted 365,000 visitors from 524 Ohio cities. They have spent more than 42,000 hours making nearly 2.5 million searches of our government compensation data.

My guess is that opponents of reform don't want this information to be easily accessible because they know what it would show: Government workers have compensation packages that far outstrip those of their private-sector neighbors. If those who challenge the new law want the data, we'll eagerly work with them to bring real transparency to Ohio's government compensation system.

As entrenched unions and their allies gear up their repeal campaign, it is clear their reform talk was hollow. As the rest of Ohio plans to use the new law to bring down government costs, its opponents will spend tens of millions of dollars to restore the status quo.

In case you've missed the past 20 years, the status quo hasn't worked for Ohio.

Matt Mayer is president of the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy Solutions, a free-market think tank in Columbus.

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