

Public-Sector Workers Not Meant for Unions

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Given some of the rhetoric from my friends on the left, one would think the rights given through the sheer brute force of a partisan group of politicians in 1983, if taken away in 2011 by similar means, would be tantamount to an unprecedented act in the history of Ohio.

We know there is bipartisan support across Ohio to tweak these rights, including from mayors and other governmental leaders.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt and union leaders who really did spill blood to protect workers during the age of sweatshops, unsafe factories and employer-hired goon violence opposed giving public-sector workers the right to collectively bargain.

Are there truly no elements of the current system that the left will concede need to be reformed?

Pay spiking? Double dipping? Massive sick-leave payouts? Pension pickups? Longevity pay? COLAs greater than inflation? Highest-three-year-salary pension formulas? Early retirement? Million-dollar secretive retirement programs? As private-sector Ohioans suffer, is the status quo for government workers appropriate?

Ohio in 2011 is not America in 1938. Government workers already have the protection of civil-service laws. With the proliferation of wage and hour laws, environmental laws, anti-discrimination laws and other workplace protections, is it really that unreasonable to suggest that perhaps adding unions on top is unnecessary and costly?

Ohio can no longer afford the luxury of public-sector collective bargaining. From 2000 to today, Ohio's private sector has lost a net of 612,700 jobs. During that same period, Ohio lost a net of only 1,600 government jobs.

That means 613,000 fewer workers today are paying for roughly the same size government Ohio had 10 years ago.

From January 1990 to today, Ohio netted a mere 102,200 private-sector jobs and 62,100 government jobs.

As New York Times columnist David Brooks recently wrote, "The coming budget cuts have nothing to do with merit. They have to do with the inexorable logic of mathematics."

With collective bargaining, schools facing fiscal emergencies must cut programs and staff, which only hurts children and younger, but potentially better, teachers. With collective bargaining, the state must cut programs serving the poor and middle class, the group of Ohioans already hit hardest by the economic crisis. With collective bargaining, mayors must cut staffing levels, which undermines public safety and the careers of young officers and firefighters.

Of course, my friends on the left have an answer: Raise taxes on businesses and rich Ohioans.

Ohio already has the seventh-highest state and local tax burden, and Ohio homeowners already have an average of 25 levies on their property. Does any reasonable person really believe that higher taxes and more levies will restore our lost prosperity?

In homes across Ohio, reduced incomes mean spending cuts. Why should government be different?

Without collective bargaining, schools, the state, mayors and other government leaders could make decisions that keep many programs running and staffing at the same level -- not one layoff. Would the decisions be painful for government workers? Of course. Would it be more painful than the pain suffered by the 613,000 private-sector Ohioans who lost their jobs over the last 10 years? Of course, not. Not even close.

Mayer is the president of the Buckeye Institute for Public Policy. This article was adapted from his testimony given Feb. 15 to the Ohio Senate Insurance, Commerce and Labor Committee.

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