

When Unions Bark but Don't Bite

Michigan's unions are discouraged by the success of reform efforts in the Great Lakes region.

By F. Vincent Vernuccio

On July 7, promises of retribution were kept. As expected, the union establishment struck back against a right-to-work law that had been enacted 18 months earlier in Michigan, the birthplace of the UAW. Taking advantage of their first opportunity, unions submitted substantially more than the 322,609 signatures required to place on the November 2014 ballot a referendum on permanent repeal. Hopes were high in union headquarters, as polls showed a Republican legislative majority and the governor on the ropes: Clearly, a high-profile campaign to make the new law a central issue was having an impact.

Such was the expected story when Governor Rick Snyder signed Michigan's worker-freedom law in December 2012. After machinations including violent protests outside the capitol and "there will be blood" rhetoric by Democratic state representative Douglas Geiss, most observers expected a major push in 2014 to repeal the law and punish the politicians who enacted it.

The July 7 deadline for petitions to place constitutional amendments on the November ballot has come and gone, as did the May 28 deadline for initiatives to change state laws. On neither date did unions submit the signatures necessary to put right-to-work before Michigan voters.

Furthermore, the (presumably figurative) bloodbath predicted by political allies of the unions for this fall's elections does not appear to be in the cards. Polls show Governor Snyder with a six-point lead over his Democratic challenger, and Democratic operatives are reportedly pessimistic about their chances to take away Republican majorities of 59–50 in the state house and 26–12 in the state senate.

While Democrats are injecting union issues into the campaign, right-to-work is not central to the effort. Savvy Michigan political consultant Mark Grebner recently told the Washington Examiner, "I'm a Democrat, and I'd say it's competitive and we're going to lose."

This seeming capitulation on right-to-work is certainly a surprise to many. It may be that internal polls show the law isn't as unpopular as union leaders had hoped, or that financial difficulties are leading some Democrats to face reality. The UAW just increased member dues by 25 percent to shore up



(Bill Pugliano/Getty Images)

Union members protest right-to-work law in December 2012.

its dwindling strike fund, and the Michigan Education Association is more than \$112 million in the red, owing to its own internal pension underfunding.

Both unions are most likely mindful that Michigan's Proposal 2 — which would have prevented right-to-work and given government unions an effective veto over legislation — went down 58–42 in November 2012. It may be that unions in general have learned a lesson from failed efforts elsewhere in the Great Lakes region to roll back recent reforms and un-elect reformers.

In Wisconsin, Governor Scott Walker strongly curtailed public-sector-union privileges in 2011, saving taxpayers more than \$2 billion in the first year and a half that the law was in effect, according to Wisconsin's McIver Institute. It also gave teachers benefits such as merit pay.

After stunts such as Democratic state senators' absconding to Illinois to avoid voting and protesters' laying siege to the capitol in Madison, unions tried everything in their power to unravel Governor Walker's reforms. From a contentious state-supreme-court race to political recalls, unions and their allies faced several must-win elections. Each time they tried to overturn reform-minded majorities they lost. As University of Wisconsin professor Charles H. Franklin noted, the supreme-court race was more of a "proxy battle for the governor's positions and much less a fight about the court itself."

The closest they came was the recall of a GOP state senator in June 2012. For a brief time it cost Republicans their control

of the Wisconsin state senate. It was a hollow victory, however, because the legislature had adjourned for the year and Republicans gained a 17–15 senate majority five months later, in the general election.

The highest-profile effort was a campaign to recall Governor Walker himself. After unions and their allies obtained more than 900,000 signatures on a recall petition, the governor won the ensuing election with a comfortable margin. Walker is up for reelection this November, and polls show him maintaining a slight lead over his Democratic challenger.

Fewer fireworks followed enactment in early 2012 of an Indiana right-to-work law by Republican legislative majorities led by Governor Mitch Daniels. That November, Hoosier Republicans kept their 37–13 majority in the senate and padded their 60–40 control of the house by adding nine seats. Term limits prohibited Governor Daniels from running for reelection in 2012.

In Ohio, unions scored their only major win against reformers, with a 2011 referendum that repealed a measure championed by GOP governor John Kasich. Senate Bill 5, which would have gone further than the Wisconsin reforms

to curtail public-sector collective-bargaining privileges, was defeated 62–38. Nevertheless, Buckeye Republicans retained their 23–10 senate majority in 2012 and added one seat in the House, for a 60–39 majority. Current polls show Kasich with a nine-point lead on his challenger for the 2014 election.

Legislators and governors who have challenged the union establishment appear to be benefiting at the polls, not suffering. This should give solace to would-be reformers who are pushing forward with their own labor reforms in Pennsylvania, Missouri, and other states.

While the fate of current Michigan politicians will not be fully known until November, if the outcome is anything like what we have seen in Wisconsin, Indiana, and Ohio, the conclusion will have to be that organized labor's bark is much worse than its bite.

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