

Right-to-work-for-less laws undermine the basic democratic process. In states that have such legislation, unions are legally obligated to represent all workers, even those who don't support the costs of such representation. The free riders get all the benefits of membership without contributing to the cost of getting them. In the end, this drags down wages and benefits for everyone.

If that kind of thing applied to other areas, I suppose you could drive 100 miles per hour in a school zone if you didn't want to be represented by the officials who set the speed limit.

So much for the technicalities of the law: Why should we care about this?

- First, if right-to-work-for-less laws were a cure-all for quality of life and well-being, we'd expect states that have them to be at the top of the list on such things. However, last year, Politico compiled the results of 14 state rankings on quality of life issues, such as income, education levels, graduation rates, life expectancy, crime, etc. They came up with a ranking for 50 states and the District of Columbia. It didn't specifically look at labor laws.

Only three of the top 10 states ranked for quality of life had right-to-work-for-less laws. On the other hand, all five of the lowest-ranked states did. Right-to-work-for-less states made up only nine of the top 25 states, but 15 of the bottom 25.

That reminds me of some drug commercials on television, where side effects sound worse than the conditions the pills aim to cure.

- Second, wages for all workers are lower in right-to-work-for-less states than in free labor states. According to the Economic Policy Institute, the average worker makes \$1,500 or 3.2 percent less per year in those states than comparable workers in free states, even if you factor in differences in the cost of living.
- Third, a 2011 study found that employer-provided health insurance and employer-sponsored pensions were both lower in those states than in free labor states.

It's true that union members generally earn higher wages than their non-union counterparts. They are also more likely to have health care benefits, paid sick leave, vacations, and pensions. Those are the kinds of benefits that make for stable families and communities.

However, there is a positive "spillover effect" from union to non-union workers. Many non-union employers offer competitive wages and benefits due to the standards set by collective bargaining agreements. Some employers even pay higher than union wages to avoid unionization.

Further, some of the basic things that we take for granted as part of living in a decent society are hard-won gains that union members fought and sometimes died to gain for everyone. These include things like the abolition of child labor, basic safety regulations, limits to the hours someone can be compelled to work, overtime laws and programs such as Social Security.

In the public policy arena, union members frequently support legislation that benefits all workers, not just union members. To use a local example, last year, unions supported an increase in the state minimum wage, even though their members earn higher wages. Labor has also been in the front lines of other struggles for justice, such as the Civil Rights movement.

Bottom line: if extremists in the West Virginia Legislature push this law through, it won't just affect union members. It will drag down many more working families and communities and speed up our race to the bottom.

Rick Wilson, director of the American Friends Service Committee's West Virginia Economic Justice Project, is a contributing columnist to the Charleston Gazette.

