



Written by [Brian Koenig](#) on December 7, 2012

Amid Union Protests, Mich. GOP Passes Right-to-work Laws; Gov. to Sign

In a controversial push, Michigan state Republican legislators made waves Thursday by passing a series of right-to-work measures, attracting a wave of protests from union members and other opponents of the bills. The statutes would bar unions from requiring employees to become union members, or to pay dues or fees as a condition of employment.



While unions and their Democratic allies stand in ardent opposition to the laws, Michigan Republicans on Thursday made a swift move to make theirs the 24th state with right-to-work on the books. A triumph in Michigan, normally considered a pro-union state, would provide the right-to-work movement its most fortified bedrock in the Rust Belt, where unions already have suffered some solid defeats.

“This is all about taking care of the hard-working workers in Michigan, being pro-worker and giving them freedom to make choices,” Michigan Gov. Rick Snyder [said](#) of the bills. “The goal isn’t to divide Michigan, it is to bring Michigan together.”

Only hours after the legislation was unveiled, both Republican-led chambers passed measures hindering private unions from requiring dues. But because of rules that require a five-day delay between votes in the Michigan House and Senate on the same bills, the final stroke won’t take place until Tuesday at the earliest. Although Snyder had previously contended that right-to-work initiatives were “not on my agenda,” he acknowledged Thursday he would sign off on the measures.

“We’ve come to the point where this issue is on the table,” Gov. Snyder affirmed Thursday in an interview. “It’s time to step up and make a decision and not let this fester.”

The effort focused on a series of bills, all of which passed with ease, The AP [reported](#):

In the end, the bills sailed through — even though some Republicans were opposed. The Senate approved a measure dealing with private-sector workers 22-16. As Democrats stormed out of the chamber, a second bill applying to government employees was passed, 22-4.

The House approved a private-sector employee bill 58-52. Both chambers are expected to approve two identical measures next week. Leaders said they would include exemptions for police and firefighters, who are covered by existing law requiring binding arbitration for their labor disputes.

Senate Majority Floor Leader Arlan Meekhof said the decision to expedite the legislation was influenced by a number of factors, including the governor’s endorsement and a ballot initiative, which positioned



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the controversial issue center-stage. Most significantly, though, Republican leaders realized they had enough votes to pursue the effort successfully, Meekhof added. "I wouldn't say there was a sense of urgency, but a sense of opportunity," he said.

The abrupt effort drew heated opposition on Thursday, with cries of outrage from Democratic lawmakers and union activists who flooded the state capitol grounds and hallways. Protests became so volatile that at one point, police had to use pepper spray to quell demonstrators who attempted to rush the Senate floor. "Shame! Shame on you!" protesters [bellowed](#) from the gallery during the Senate vote. Security guards ousted an outspoken demonstrator who shouted, "Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler! That's what you people are!"

Responding to combative outcries from opponents, Snyder and Republican leaders rejected critics' arguments that the legislation was engineered to weaken unions by dismantling revenue-drivers needed to bargain effectively with employers. In fact, they asserted, a "freedom to work" law in Michigan would make union leaders more amenable to members' needs and grant workers the freedom to decide whether they desire union representation.

"This does not change collective bargaining and this is not anti-union," said House Speaker Jase Bolger. "It is pro-worker."

Still, Democrats railed against Republicans for acting before the new legislative body takes office in January, as the Republican majority lost five House seats in the recent election. "These guys have lied to us all along the way," Senate Democratic leader Gretchen Whitmer charged. "They are pushing through the most divisive legislation they could come up with in the dark of night, at the end of a lame-duck session and then they're going to hightail it out of town. It's cowardly."

After years of economic turmoil, Michigan has evolved into somewhat of an economic success story. By summer's end, the state's Economic Activity Index reached a [10-year high](#), and the state has been creating jobs at a steady pace. More than 160,000 new jobs were created since 2009, and economists at the University of Michigan [project](#) that the state will generate another 111,000 jobs by 2014.

However, "the state can't coast on these positive [economic] trends," [writes](#) F. Vincent Vernuccio, a former Labor Policy Counsel at the Competitive Enterprise Institute. Bernie DeGroat, an economist at the University of Michigan, [says](#) the state's "rebound from the recession has not been nearly as robust as most past episodes of recovery."

Furthermore, Michigan's neighboring states have not stalled in their efforts to improve their own economies. Ohio, for example, has been allaying its tax burdens on businesses, and earlier this year, Indiana became a right-to-work state.

Democrats and liberal activists claim right-to-work laws disenfranchise workers by lowering wages and deteriorating benefits. Government assistance and strong union support, they assert, are imperative to a healthy economic recovery. Vernuccio explains why these assertions are unfounded:

Consider a few top-line facts about right-to-work states. Private-sector employee compensation in right-to-work states has grown by an inflation-adjusted [12.0% between 2001-2011](#), according to data from the Bureau of Economic Analysis and Bureau of Labor Statistics. That compares with just 3.0% over the same period in states where workers can be forced to join a union as a condition of getting a job.

With growing paychecks come growing populations. Between 2000 and 2011, [right-to-work](#)



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[states](#) have seen an increase of 11.3% in the number of residents between the ages of 25-34 according to the Bureau of the Census. Non right-to-work states, over that same period, have seen an increase of only 0.6%.

“In other words, though Michigan’s economy is going in the right direction, it can’t let up now,” Vernuccio concludes. “And that’s where a right-to-work law comes into play.”



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