‘Right to Work’ is wrong

By Julie Lind
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Nearly 60 million people say they would join a union today if they could. Union approval stands nationally at 65%, one of the highest marks in a half century. The problem? Union-busters, and big employers that take advantage of woefully outdated laws to undermine the right of workers to organize and collectively bargain.

Just take so-called “right to work” laws, for example. Across the country, anti-worker legislators are relentlessly fighting to pass right to work, which has a more than 70-year track record of lowering wages, reducing benefits and making workplaces more dangerous.

Here are the results: On average, workers in states with “right to work” laws make nearly $9,000 less per year than workers in states without these laws ($50,174 compared with $59,163).

In 2019, 24% of jobs in “right to work” states were in low-wage occupations, compared to just 14.5% of jobs in other states.

The rate of workplace deaths is 37% higher in states with “right to work” laws.

The Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act now pending in Congress would override right to work and other anti-worker, anti-union laws and strike a major victory for civil rights as our country demands racial and economic justice. It is the most significant worker empowerment legislation since the Great Depression.
If passed, it would dramatically increase penalties for employers that violate workers’ rights; protect strikes and other protest activity; streamline the process for reaching a collective bargaining agreement once a union is formed; and so much more.

This isn’t just any bill — it’s civil rights legislation — protecting women, immigrants, people of color and the LGBTQIA+ community, and it’s economic stimulus, putting more money in the pockets of workers, which helps our economy build back better. It’s a generational opportunity for the more than 60 million workers who want to join a union but haven’t found the path to get there under current law. A union contract is the single best tool we have to close racial and gender wage gaps, and to ensure dignity and due process for workers, regardless of where we were born, who we are or what industry we work in.

As things stand today, the penalties against employers who illegally fire or retaliate against workers trying to form a union are far too small to be a disincentive for most employers. As a result, most companies routinely retaliate against pro-union workers, because they know it will undermine the organizing campaign and they will face no real consequences. To them, it’s simply the cost of doing business.

For the first time in modern history, however, we have the chance to turn this around. The Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act would hold employers accountable and institute civil penalties for violations of the law, including back pay and damages. As President Biden recently said, “America wasn’t built by Wall Street; it was built by the middle class, and unions built the middle class. Unions put power in the hands of workers. They level the playing field. They give you a stronger voice for your health, your safety, higher wages, protections from racial discrimination and sexual harassment. Unions lift up workers, both union and nonunion, and especially Black and brown workers.”

The PRO Act would put the decision of whether to form a union back where it belongs — in the hands of workers, free from employer interference.

The PRO Act was passed by the House last year but was blocked in the Senate. This year, we have another opportunity to make history. It’s time to pass the PRO Act and end “right to work” for good.

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