

Ohio leaders greet right-to-work bills with caution

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COLUMBUS: Two bills intended to strip Ohio unions of the ability to compel membership or to automatically collect money from members appeared dead on arrival Wednesday at the Ohio Statehouse.

Senate President Keith Faber issued an after-hours statement indicating he didn't believe the right-to-work proposals by state Reps. Kristina Roegner of Hudson and Ron Maag of Lebanon had either the support or the interest within his caucus to move forward.

"We have an ambitious agenda focused on job creation and economic recovery, and right-to-work legislation is not on that list," he said.

The measures would prohibit any requirements that employees join or pay dues to any employee organization. They also establish as state policy "that each employee must be fully free to decide whether to associate, organize, designate a representative, or join or assist an employee organization."

"By introducing these two bills, we're putting forward a proposal that we believe will make Ohio a freer and more prosperous place to work," Roegner said.

Her bill would apply to private-sector unions, while Maag's would apply to public-sector unions — the same entities targeted in a sweeping collective-bargaining overhaul rejected by more than 60 percent of Ohio voters in 2011.

"We wanted to give the General Assembly flexibility," Roegner said in a phone interview Wednesday with the Beacon Journal. "Maybe they want to do just public and not private, or want to let voters decide.

"I'm fine no matter how it gets done," she said.

Roegner disagreed with links being made between this legislation and Senate Bill 5.

"I would argue this could not be more opposite Senate Bill 5," she said. "Senate Bill 5 applied guardrails to collective bargaining. ... This gets to the heart of an individual worker's freedom — to be represented or not. I don't believe it should be a condition of employment whether you join a union. It doesn't seem American to me."

Faber said the bill would be an easy target for criticism from Democrats.

"The only purpose this discussion serves right now is to generate a bunch of breathless fundraising appeals from the Ohio Democratic Party," he said.

Faber's statement followed a cautious lack of support for the bills by Gov. John Kasich and Republican House Speaker William Batchelder.

House Democrats joined labor leaders in quickly challenging the proposals, saying they are built on myths about existing labor law and are intended to undercut working people in favor of corporations.

Democratic state Rep. Tracy Heard of Columbus said Ohio workers already have the ability to opt out of union membership, and those who do are not required to pay dues.

Unions can collect what's called a "fair share fee" to cover costs directly associated with collective bargaining, which can include the settlement of grievances, pursuit of workplace safety compliance and various legal actions intended to benefit all workers included in the bargaining unit.

"America's right-to-work states are the poorest, most unhealthy and undereducated states in the union. That is a fact," said Joe Rugola, director of the 35,000-member Ohio Association of Public School Employees.

He said "right-wing extremist legislators" and corporate interests motivated by "a godless greed" were aligned to unravel the benefits and security unions bring.

“Right-to-work attacks the heart and foundation of that notion and, because of that, it’s our intention with every fiber of our being to make war on those who want to make war on the American middle-class,” he said.

Maag said he doesn’t view the bills as either anti-worker or anti-union.

“We believe that unions have the right, and sometimes even the responsibility, to organize. The purpose of unions is to protect equality,” he said. “However, workplace freedom is also about fairness. Strong-arming workers into joining a union is not fair. Getting or keeping a job based on union affiliation is not fair. Workers who contribute to candidates they do not support certainly is not fair.”

Tim Burga, president of the Ohio AFL-CIO, said the attacks were erroneous — union workers can receive back dues spent for political purposes they object to — and the bills’ sponsors should not purport to be defending unionized workers’ rights.

“Let’s be clear: This isn’t being brought forward by union workers,” he said.

Twenty-four states, including neighboring Indiana and Michigan, have such right-to-work provisions in place.

While the political will for right-to-work legislation might not be there, Roegner said she has no doubt that public sentiment in her district and across the state favors it — a view that several recent polls support.

A Quinnipiac University poll from February 2012 showed Ohioans supporting right-to-work legislation 54-40, according to the polling institute’s website.

“Every poll I’m looking at shows this is overwhelmingly supported by the people of Ohio,” Roegner said.

Beacon Journal staff writer Stephanie Warsmith contributed to this report.