

‘Right to Work’ is Wrong

ANTI-UNION BALLOT MEASURE LIKELY IN 2016

OK, maybe I was a little premature last week picking Ted Cruz to win the Republican presidential primary. Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker received 25 percent support from likely Iowa caucus attendees in a poll released last Wednesday, leading Rand Paul (13 percent), Mike Huckabee (11 percent) and Jeb Bush (10 percent). Of course, early presidential polls a year before voters start the nominating process tend to show name recognition and are not a predictor of caucuses and primaries or who will become the nominee. Rudy Giuliani and Hillary Rodham Clinton were early leaders in the polls taken a year before they ran for president.

Now “likely Iowa Republican caucus-goers” aren’t exactly moderates — 45 percent self-identify as “very conservative,” a third are Tea Party supporters and they love Scott Walker. Quinnipiac University pollster Peter A. Brown says, “Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker is taking the Republican political world by storm; he’s gone from being unknown outside Wisconsin to the hot candidate, poised to become the front-runner for the GOP presidential nomination.” His ratings are through the roof: 57 percent view him favorably to only 7 percent who view him unfavorably.

Why is Scott Walker so popular? Because he led the recent charge to punish public employees in Wisconsin by making it a “right-to-work” state. Right-wing politicians and their corporate backers want to weaken the power of workers and their unions through “right-to-work” laws. Their efforts are a partisan political ploy that undermines the basic rights of workers. By making unions weaker, these laws lower wages and living standards for all workers in the state. In fact, workers in the 25 states with these laws earn an average of \$5,971 less a year than workers in other states, according to the AFL-CIO. Median household income in states with these laws is 12 percent less than in other states.

Now it looks like “right to work” will be on the Oregon ballot in 2016. Union-related ballot fights have a long history in Oregon. Tax activist Bill Sizemore ran several unsuccessful ballot measures in the 1990s and 2000s seeking to prevent union payroll deductions from being used for political purposes. Today, Jill Gibson, who has been supported by some of the state’s major conservative political donors, is trying to put a measure on the 2016 ballot that would allow public employees to opt out of financially supporting a union. Currently, Oregon

public employees don’t have to join a union that bargains for them, but they still have to pay “fair-share” fees aimed at covering their costs of representation.

Gibson first introduced a right-to-work initiative in 2013 that quickly attracted the interest of Our Oregon, a coalition of several unions and other left-of-center groups. Under pressure from then-Gov. John Kitzhaber, Gibson and her backers agreed to drop her planned 2014 initiatives. As part of the deal, the unions also withdrew their own initiatives to raise taxes on wealthier individuals and corporations.

This time around there is no compromise; there’s no Grand Bargain. Gibson is getting money from the same donors who backed her abortive run at the ballot in 2014. Her major backer that year was the Freres Lumber Co., which contributed \$45,000. Other supporters included Stimson Lumber Co. owner Andrew Miller, who gave \$8,000, and Nevada businessman Loren Parks, who gave \$6,000. Our Oregon and Gibson’s union opponents are already preparing for what’s shaping up to be an expensive and bitter ballot battle in next year’s elections. Unions are already gearing up for a heavy campaign season, as they plan to go to the ballot with tax increase proposals.

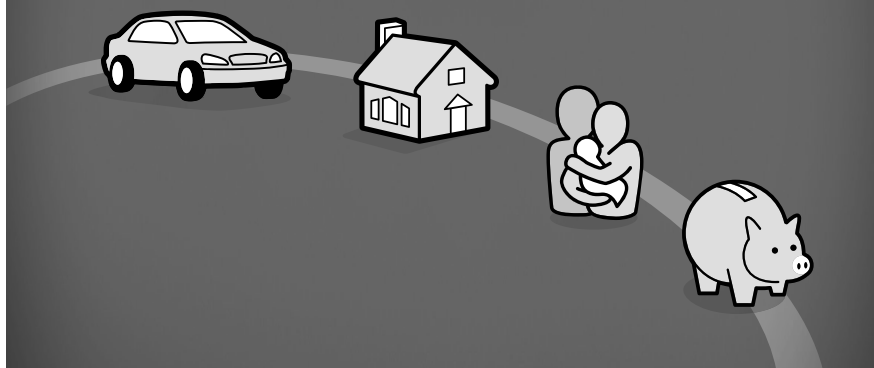
Gibson has tweaked her ballot measure to dampen one of the biggest complaints thrown at right-to-work legislation — that it allows “free riders” to get the benefits of union representation without having to financially support the union. Her new ballot measures now include provisions saying that public workers who don’t join a union will no longer receive representation. Can you imagine 44,000 Oregon teachers dealing directly with their employers on wages, benefits and working conditions? How about 40,000 state workers?

So, stay tuned for Scott Walker and “right to work” in Oregon in 2016. But don’t spend too much time worrying about the Iowa caucus results. After all, it’s worth remembering Rick Santorum and Mike Huckabee won the last two Iowa caucuses and neither came close to the nomination. The other result of this last Iowa poll was that Jeb Bush and Chris Christie were the biggest losers in that they tied at 26 percent when likely caucus participants were asked to name a candidate they “would definitely not support!” ■

Tony Corcoran of Cottage Grove is a former state legislator and soon-to-be retired state worker. The views expressed herein are his alone.

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