

Commentary: GOP, unions tangle for public support

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The world has changed in big ways since Ohio enacted a public employees collective bargaining law in 1983, and overall that change has not been good for labor unions in Ohio and across the U.S.

One constant remains: The strength of unions depends on the economic law of supply and demand. That's important to keep in mind as the GOP-led state government pushes forward with plans to dismantle the 1983 legislation, considered among the most union-friendly public employee bargaining laws in the country.

GOP plans, backed by Gov. John Kasich, House Speaker William Batchelder of Medina and Senate President Tom Niehaus of New Richmond, might not leave police, firefighters, teachers and others totally at their bosses' mercy.

They would go a long way, however, to push Ohio back to the 1947 Ferguson Act that banned public employee strikes and provided for firing strikers.

In 1983, public employees were junior partners in the labor movement. The big unions represented workers in auto, steel and tire factories. Of the 1 million union members in Ohio, 461,915 had manufacturing jobs. There were 242,239 public employee union members.

That changed drastically by 2010. Overall union membership in Ohio had dropped to 654,925, and membership among manufacturing workers fell to 129,887. Membership in public employee unions, meanwhile, grew to 312,000.

The unions representing industrial workers expanded in the 20th century because General Motors, Goodyear, U.S. Steel and other companies needed workers for their factories.

Workers put a price on filling that demand — union contracts that brought millions of Americans into the middle class.

By 2010, that all had changed. Automation and outsourcing had devastated industrial unions.

Among public workers, however, the demand continues. "Anything requiring face-to-face contact is hard to outsource," said Gregory M. Saltzman, chairman of the economics and management department at Albion College in Michigan and a labor researcher at the University of Michigan. "You can't easily outsource kindergarten instruction to a video conference with a teacher in Bangladesh."

Nor can mayors easily bring in firefighters and police officers from China.

Kasich talks about lessening demand for public employees by privatizing more of state government, such as the prison system. That will take time.

In the classic 20th century labor showdowns, public sentiment often was with workers, seen as battling greedy corporations.

The current battle is not just between Republicans and public unions. It's also a struggle for the support of the voters, the ultimate bosses of both politicians and workers. The results so far are unclear, but the battle has just begun.

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