

Bill Kaplan: PRO Act will help restore the American Dream

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The 1935 National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) states: “It is declared to be the policy of the United States to eliminate the causes of certain substantial obstructions to the free flow of commerce ... by encouraging ... collective bargaining and by protecting the exercise by workers of full freedom of association, self-organization, and designation of representatives of their own choosing, for the purpose of negotiating the terms and conditions of their employment or other mutual aid or protection.”

However, the NLRA only covered private-sector workers. President Kennedy gave federal workers the right to collective bargaining. And, in Wisconsin Democratic Governor Gaylord Nelson and GOP Governor Warren Knowles extended collective bargaining rights respectively to local government employees, including teachers and state employees. It was widely understood that labor unions were essential to extending the American Dream to all. President Eisenhower said: “Only a handful of unreconstructed reactionaries harbor the ugly thought of breaking unions.” Even Nixon supported pro-labor legislation, including the Occupational Safety and Health Act.

But President Reagan broke with that bipartisan tradition and fired striking air traffic controllers. It has gotten much worse. Big business, including the Koch brothers, collaborated with Republicans to destroy labor unions. Former Wisconsin GOP Governor Scott Walker falsely said: “Collective bargaining is not a right” in 2011, he rammed Act 10 through the GOP-led legislature, eviscerating public-sector unions. Later, after vowing not to, Walker and GOP state Assembly Speaker Robin Vos fast-tracked passage of a so-called right-to-work law (unions must represent free-riders who refuse to pay their share of the cost of collective bargaining). 26 other states have the same law.

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The results have been devastating. Nationally, union membership has fallen to 10.8 percent, Wisconsin down to 8.7 percent. Over 100,000 Wisconsin workers are no longer union members. The Washington Post headline said: “Wisconsin unions crippled by clash with governor” (Walker). The economic consequences are worse: the near-death of unions has held down wages, while widening income inequality, with no say in benefits or working conditions.

President Biden wants to restore the American Dream for workers. He strongly supports congressional passage of the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act. Biden said: “Nearly 60 million Americans would join a union if they get a chance, but too many employers and states prevent them from doing so through anti-union attacks. They know that without unions, they can run the table on workers – union and non-union alike.”

The PRO Act passed in the House. Wisconsin Democratic representatives voted yes, with (voting) Wisconsin GOP representatives opposed. The NYT reported: “The bill ... would ... shield workers seeking to form a union from retribution or firing, strengthen the government’s power to punish employers who violate workers’ rights and outlaw mandatory meetings that employers often use to try to quash an organizing drive.”

The Senate GOP minority is blocking consideration of the PRO Act. Wisconsin GOP Senator Ron Johnson outrageously refuses to meet with PRO Act supporters, sharply contrasting with Wisconsin Democratic Senator Tammy Baldwin.

- Kaplan wrote a guest column from Washington, D.C., for the Wisconsin State Journal from 1995 – 2009.