Public-employee unions work against public good

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In Ohio, about 16 percent of workers are members of a union. Just under half of them work in the public sector -- state, local and federal governments.

If a group of private-sector workers is able to unionize a work site because the employer hasn't provided them with good reasons to reject the union, then good for the workers -- as long as the playing field remains level between employers and employees.

But because taxpayer funds are used to employ public-sector workers, a higher level of scrutiny should be applied when evaluating the utility of unions. After all, government workers aren't toiling in sweatshops, breathing dirty air in coal mines or picking crops on a hot summer day. Are taxpayers really expected to believe that the government is oppressing or abusing workers on a routine basis, necessitating the protection of a union? Such a claim doesn't pass the sniff test. Most public-sector employees work hard but do so in fairly pleasant conditions, such as classrooms and office buildings.

Under the coverage already provided by the litany of federal, state and local statutes and regulations, workers are protected from most workplace harms. From wage and hour laws to anti-discrimination laws to worker-compensation coverage to occupational health and safety requirements to wrongful-termination protections, the only significant items not covered are how much public-sector employees get paid, what their benefits are and how they can be terminated.
That is where unions significantly increase costs for taxpayers.

Historically, taxpayers agree to provide public-sector employees with secure employment and generous pensions in exchange for lower pay than they might earn in the private sector. At some point, someone forgot about that grand bargain. This reality was illustrated in a recent report titled, "The State of Working Ohio 2007" from the think thank Policy Matters Ohio. The authors noted that those "who were in a union earned substantially more than nonunion workers in median hourly wages in 2006."

According to the U.S. Department of Labor's most recent yearly data, public-sector employees in Ohio make more than private-sector employees. Specifically, in Ohio, the average weekly wage in 2005 for a local public-sector employee was $706, for a state public-sector employee was $854, and for a federal public-sector employee was $1,141. The average weekly wage for private-sector employees was $708 -- just slightly better than local government and only 60 percent of federal workers' page. Add in public-sector health-care benefits, secure pensions and functional lifetime employment, and no wonder government continues to grow.

The rate of government growth in Ohio over the past decade or so has been three times greater than inflation. In 2007, Ohio taxpayers face the fifth-highest state and local tax burden in the country, and the business-tax climate for job creators is the 49th worst in the country. We simply cannot continue to pay public employees increases greater than inflation, and unions certainly aren't interested in slowing the rate of pay (or dues) of their members.

Unions don't even attempt to hide this fact. The AFL-CIO, one of the largest public-sector unions in Ohio, brags on its Web site: "Union members earn better wages and benefits than workers who aren't union members. On average, union workers' wages are 30 percent higher than their nonunion counterparts. While only 14 percent of nonunion workers have guaranteed pensions, fully 68 percent of union workers do."

The unions fail to understand a fundamental distinction between the public and private sectors. Namely, while fighting for higher wages in the private sector might be appropriate for unions, given the opposing interest of employers to cut costs in order to increase profitability; in the public sector, the employer has no vested interest in keeping wages down, given that higher wages don't affect any equivalent measure of performance like profitability. When is the last time you read about a government going out of business or laying off thousands of employees because of cost-cutting? The "employer" just raises taxes. Hence, taxpayers foot the bill as the cost of government rises higher each year.

Here's an idea: Ditch the unions, lock in wages to inflation plus pay for performance, adopt the most generous health-care policy in place today, replace pension plans with 401(k) plans starting with new workers, and apply the same protections the rest of us possess. Public-sector employees still will have it better than private-sector employees, but at least it won't cost taxpayers so much.

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