

Is there a civil right to unionize?

By [Antony Davies](#) 5:32 PM 03/02/2012

A [recent op-ed](#) in The New York Times called for new labor laws that will ensure that workers have the right to organize labor unions. These laws already exist, so what are unions griping about?

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It's not that workers are being prevented from unionizing. The problem, as unions see it, is that it is too difficult to *force* workers to unionize. Free workers have weighed the costs and benefits of today's unions and most have freely chosen to do without them. It is this free will that unions — and their advocates on the country's op-ed pages — seek to quash.

Union membership in the private sector has fallen to 7% not because unions have failed, but because they have done so well that — at least for the present — they are no longer needed. The exploitation of employees by their employers is a thing of the past; in fact, nowadays it seems like we're more likely to hear about union bosses exploiting union members than about employers exploiting employees. Today, no matter how much labor leaders and their advocates pretend otherwise, labor reform means reforming unions.

Unions are noble creations — free associations of free people. But they have been perverted and subverted to become agents of theft and conspirators in coercion. According to [OpenSecrets.org](#), from 1989 to 2009 unions donated more money to political candidates than did any other industry or special interest group. Unions donated twice as much to politicians as did all telecommunications, insurance, tobacco, pharmaceutical and real estate firms combined.

Spending member dues on a narrow partisan agenda is central to the way today's unions work. While corporations tend to hedge their bets by splitting their donations evenly between Republicans and Democrats, 90% of labor union donations go to Democrats.

I have no special beef with the Democrats — I'd be equally concerned if unions gave 90% of their donations to Republicans. In a two-party political system, a union can easily throw its weight behind one party in exchange for that party, with a wink and a nod, giving in to union demands when it comes to power.

That's exactly what's happened. And since there's no denying that Democrats are — sometimes proudly — the party of government, the unionization of more than a third of government workers is a cause for grave concern. Unionization in the public sector is a relatively easy task, because many states and cities passed laws in the 1960s and 1970s permitting what even Franklin Roosevelt opposed: collective bargaining by public employees.

The problem is that politicians and bureaucrats on the union gravy train don't pay for public sector union demands out of their own pockets. We do. Every concession that unions gain is paid for by taxpayers, who are conspicuously absent from the negotiating table.

One doesn't need to have an ideological axe to grind in order to find this deeply disturbing. The Economic Freedom of North America Index, which lists the percentage of unionized workers in each of the 50 states, shows that states with greater union density are also in greater economic peril. The 10 most unionized states have debts that average almost 20% of their GDP, versus 15% for the 10 least unionized states.

Freedom is the antidote to exploitation, but it cuts both ways. To guard against employer exploitation, American workers must be free to unionize. But, to guard against union exploitation, American workers must also be free to choose not to unionize. To guard against politicians and unions working together to exploit taxpayers, American workers who freely choose to work in the public sector should be barred from unionizing.

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