



'Right to Work' is wrong for Wisconsin

By Darin Von Ruden

Ask most farm kids if there is the "Right to Work" on the farm, and most of them would laugh. " 'Right' to work? How about 'duty' to work!"

Farm kids learn early on to pull their own weight on the farm. In the process, they learn that doing their part is also a source of pride and camaraderie. There is honor in being part of the family effort, working side-by-side for the good of the whole. And they learn that many hands make light work.

Those who are championing so-called "Right to Work" legislation seem to have missed those lessons. Simply stated, "right to work" laws allow, and in fact encourage, freeriding. Unions have a legal duty to represent all workers in a workplace, whether those workers are union members or not. "Right to work" laws eliminate the parallel requirement that workers in a union shop pay their fair share of union dues. To me, a worker enjoying the benefits of union representation without paying his or her dues shows the same poor form as a farm kid eating his fill at the supper table without doing any of the work that produced the food in the first place.

When workers come together and support strong unions, the benefits ripple out into society as a whole. When unions advocate for a living wage and good benefits for their own workers, it has the spillover effect of raising wages in non-unionized workplaces as well, since union and non-union employers are competing to hire the same workers. Unions also fight for safe working conditions, fair work schedules, and representation in the event of a workplace grievance. Unions give workers a collective voice, so that there is a more fair distribution of profits and power between workers and managers.

Farmers don't have labor unions, so why should I as a farmer be concerned about "right to work" legislation? For me, it's a matter of principle. Wisconsin Farmers Union is a general farm organization, not a union, but we do share many of the values that unions uphold. Farmers, like workers, sometimes need to band together in order to get fair compensation. One farmer bargaining alone with a buyer does not have any leverage at all to negotiate a fair price. That's why farmers form cooperatives. Farmers would be hurt significantly if lawmakers attempted to dismantle the Capper-Volstead Act, the legal cornerstone for cooperatives. "Right to Work" laws would strip away similar protections that allow workers to effectively join together and negotiate fair contracts. The 1892 Populist platform summed it up concisely: "The interests of rural and civic labor are the same; their enemies are identical." The powerful interests that are intent on undercutting the strength of unions might well take on cooperatives next.

In the meantime, farmers do not benefit in the least when our union member neighbor's wages go down. Lower wages for workers mean less money to buy the food that farmers produce, less spending to fuel an already-tenuous rural economy and less income tax revenue to pay for roads, schools and technical college programs to train in the next generation of farmers and workers. Studies show that average annual wages for workers are \$5,000 to \$6,000 less in right-to-work states. Put it all together, and "right to work" makes even less sense now than it did at first glance. This farm kid's reply to "Right to Work" legislation? No thanks.



Darin Von Ruden is a Westby dairy farmer and president of the Wisconsin Farmers Union, a member-driven organization committed to enhancing the quality of life for family farmers, rural communities, and all people through educational opportunities, cooperative endeavors, and civic engagement.