Right-To-Work Laws

It’s up to state legislatures to decide whether workers must join a union to get or keep a job. So far, 23 states—along with Guam—have decided workers should have a “right to work” without having to join a union.

A renewed focus on collective bargaining rights in the last two years has rekindled interest in these laws. Sixteen states considered right-to-work bills last year, although none passed. So far this year, lawmakers in 12 states have introduced bills; Indiana’s legislation passed in February.

Proponents of right-to-work laws argue they attract more businesses and create more jobs. Opponents counter that workers in right-to-work states earn lower wages, thereby decreasing consumer demand, resulting in fewer jobs. Right-to-work states tend to have much lower rates of union membership.

The first right-to-work laws were passed in the 1940s and 1950s in response to the growth of unions. There was a surge of interest in the 1970s and again in the 1990s, but only a handful of states have enacted right-to-work laws since that initial wave.

— Jeanne Mejeur