**Headline:** Why the Repeal of Anti-Union Laws in Michigan Boosts Workers Nationwide

By Tom Conway

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**Source:** Independent Media Institute

**Credit Line:** *This article was produced by the* [*Independent Media Institute*](https://independentmediainstitute.org/)*.*

**Tags:** Labor, Economy, Activism, Politics, Law, GOP/Right Wing, Democratic Party, Opinion, North America/United States of America, Election Regulation, Health Care, Midterm Elections, Local Elections, News, Time-Sensitive

**[Article Body:]**

The United Steelworkers (USW) mounted tireless [battles for fair trade and other lifelines](https://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/02/business/a-steel-company-fights-for-its-life.html) that helped to keep McLouth Steel open during the 1980s, enabling Jay McMurran and thousands of other Michigan workers to raise families and build pensions amid one of the nation’s worst economic crises.

Recognizing that other workers need the same kind of strength behind them, McMurran resolved to fight back when Republicans [rammed union-gutting “right-to-work” (RTW) legislation through the state legislature](https://hotelworkers.org/article/michigan-becomes-a-so-called-right-to-work-state) in 2012.

He and other union supporters and their allies [worked relentlessly for years](https://www.bridgemi.com/michigan-government/michigan-legislature-redistricting-paves-way-democrats-seize-control) to oust the corporate toadies and elect pro-worker lawmakers instead. Their long struggle culminated in victory on March 21, 2023, when new Democratic majorities in the House and Senate [voted to repeal](https://www.detroitnews.com/story/business/2023/03/21/michigan-house-democrats-voting-to-repeal-right-to-work-restore-union-scale-prevailing-wage/70032724007/) the deceptively named RTW laws, [restoring workers’ full power](https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/3900517-michigan-senate-votes-to-repeal-right-to-work-law-in-victory-for-organized-labor/) to bargain fair contracts and safe working conditions.

Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer has since signed the legislation, which represents the latest in a [string of victories](https://www.wmur.com/article/nh-house-rejects-buries-right-to-work-bill-on-key-roll-call-of-199-175/36623777) for workers [mobilizing to build strength](https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/illinois-votes-to-protect-collective-bargaining-rights-in-state-amendment) across the country.

No one in America is ever forced to join a union, and no union wants workers to join against their will. Yet a union is legally obligated to serve all workers in its bargaining unit.

Many states allow unions to charge nonmembers a small fee to help cover the costs of representation. But in some states, RTW laws pushed by corporations and anti-worker groups enable nonmembers to receive union services for free.

These laws intentionally divide workers, erode the solidarity that’s the foundation of union strength, and starve unions of the resources needed for effective bargaining, training, and other essential purposes—all to the boss’s benefit.

“‘Right to work’ is simply a union-busting scam that the Republicans dress up as ‘choice,’” observed McMurran, a longtime USW member who worked at McLouth Steel for 27 years.

“It weakens the local union,” he said. “It weakens every worker’s position when you get into collective bargaining, when you get into grievance hearings, when you get into arbitrations. The boss knows your weaknesses, and he exploits them.”

It’s no surprise that workers burdened by RTW laws make [significantly lower wages](https://www.epi.org/publication/right-to-work-states-have-lower-wages/) than their counterparts in other states. They’re also [less likely to have employer-provided health insurance and retirement plans](https://www.epi.org/blog/why-right-to-work-was-always-wrong-for-michigan-restoring-workers-rights-is-key-to-reversing-growing-income-inequality-in-michigan/) than other workers.

At the same time, workers in RTW states [face a higher risk of dying on the job](https://oem.bmj.com/content/75/10/736) because they lack the strong, unified voice needed to fight for workplace safety.

“Everything I have is because I was a Steelworker,” said McMurran, who recalled that unshakable solidarity among his coworkers not only ensured good contracts and safe working conditions but also kept their employer in business.

“The steel mill that I came out of was in financial trouble for 13 years, and the Steelworkers fought to keep the place open nearly every day of those 13 years,” said McMurran, citing the [busloads of USW members who converged on Washington, D.C.,](https://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/02/business/a-steel-company-fights-for-its-life.html) in the 1980s to demand support for the company. “We actually kept the place going so more people qualified for pensions and employer-sponsored health care. We did some good things there.”

Sadly, despite successes like that, Michigan’s GOP legislators conspired with corporations and other [anti-union interests](https://labornotes.org/2012/12/ten-thousand-aghast-right-work-passes-michigan) to undermine worker power.

McMurran was among the [10,000 protesters](https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/snyder-signs-michigan-anti-union-right-work-measures-over-protests-flna1c7552322) who packed the statehouse in a last-ditch effort to stop Republicans from pushing RTW through a lame-duck session during the 2012 holiday season.

Union members lost that skirmish but won the war.

After Republicans passed the legislation over the protesters’ objections, McMurran said, workers and their allies launched a “long-game” plan to reverse it.

Workers helped pass a 2018 referendum that [took redistricting out of the hands of partisan political hacks](https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2018/11/06/proposal-2-michigan-gerrymandering/1847078002/) and put fair-minded citizens in charge of the process. New, equitably drawn legislative districts enabled voters to elect pro-worker lawmakers willing to represent them rather than corporations.

And those pro-worker majorities, in turn, speedily acted to end RTW. For McMurran, the victory highlighted both the power of collective action and the importance of electing the right people to office.

Workers in other states also are beating back RTW amid [growing support for organized labor](https://news.gallup.com/poll/398303/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx) and a pandemic that underscored Americans’ need for good wages, affordable health care, and the other benefits that unions deliver.

For example, even as Republicans in Michigan united behind a failed defense of RTW, [several GOP legislators in Montana helped to kill RTW legislation](https://www.ktvh.com/news/68th-session/montana-legislative-committee-rejects-right-to-work-bill) in that state in February 2023. The [opponents](https://montanafreepress.org/2023/02/17/unions-appear-en-masse-to-oppose-montana-right-to-work-bill/) included Republican Senator Jason Small, a [member](https://boilermakers.org/news/locals/local-11-member-advocates-for-labor-in-montana-statehouse) of the International Brotherhood of Boilermakers, who described his 26 years of union membership as a “heck of an opportunity” in his life.

“It has nothing to do with red or blue. It’s what’s right for people and their families,” explained Curtis Schomer, vice president of USW Local 11-0001.

Schomer, who ran unsuccessfully as a [Republican candidate for the Montana House](https://billingsgazette.com/special-section/curtis-schomer-house-district-55-republican/article_a2bbb0be-c6a9-5c17-9577-82456413fb13.html) in 2022, repeatedly traveled to Helena, the state capital, to rally against RTW and testify against the harmful legislation.

He noted that a strong union gives him and his 1,300 coworkers at the Sibanye-Stillwater mining complex the power to take safety concerns directly to management and address problems immediately. In a dangerous industry like mining, he noted, that kind of voice saves lives and ensures workers return home safely at the end of their shifts.

Schomer expects pro-business interests to continue to push RTW in Montana. But he predicted those efforts will fall flat in communities that not only have a rich legacy of labor activism but also continue to appreciate the benefits unions provide.

“Our unions do a lot for our communities,” Schomer said. “They especially do a lot on workplace safety. People see that.”