

Unions brace for fight as Ohio GOP moves 'Right to Work,' strike bans

By Anna Staver
Cleveland.com

COLUMBUS, Ohio -- Statehouse Republicans are moving bills that gradually limit union power--a strategy critics fear is an "under-the-radar" revival of Ohio's [infamous 2011 overhaul](#) of public unions.

GOP leaders say legislation like [Senate Bills 1 and 8](#) protect taxpayer dollars, improve student learning and drive economic growth.

Democrats argue these bills set Ohio on a piecemeal path to accomplishing what former Gov. John Kasich's couldn't with Senate Bill 5: Gut the powers of public unions.

"That has continually been the concern," said House Minority Leader Allison Russo, a Columbus-area Democrat. "While we may not have the SB 5, the big bill, this death by 1,000 paper cuts attack on collective bargaining and worker rights is very real, and we see it pop up in all kinds of places."

Her warning comes at a critical time for unions -- and for Democrats. Nationwide union membership dropped in 2024 to 9.9% of the workforce, [the lowest recorded](#) by the U.S. Department of Labor. At the same time, certain rank-and-file union members [continue to drift toward](#) President Donald Trump and the GOP. Republicans have dominated Ohio in every election since SB 5.

That might sound like a cautionary fact for Republicans. Don't alienate the voting bloc you've come to rely upon. But Vanderbilt University professor Dan Cornfield said the GOP has never courted public employees.

"The Republican Party has generally stood for small government," Cornfield said. "When they try to reduce the size of the public sector workforce, they are acting in a way that's consistent with their philosophy."

Who they've pivoted toward, he said, is heavy manufacturing workers: People who live in the Great Lakes region and those who worry about foreign countries and foreign workers taking their jobs.

Those unions came out in force against SB 5. And the big question is: Will they do it again?

Divide and conquer

SB 5 passed in March 2011. The law restricted collective bargaining rights for public employees, including teachers, police officers and firefighters.

Key provisions included:

- Prohibiting striking.
- Restricting collective bargaining to wages only.
- Eliminating automatic pay raises based on seniority and shifting toward merit-based pay.

The bill sparked massive protests from labor unions like Ohio AFL-CIO and the [Ohio Federation of Teachers](#).

“It was a union attack basically,” Ohio Federation of Teachers President Melissa Cropper said. “An attack on collective bargaining.”

They formed a coalition to bring the law before voters that November. More than 60% of voters rejected SB 5, dealing a major blow to the Kasich administration.

“People know you can’t do something like that again,” Buckeye Institute researcher Greg Lawson said.

He supported SB 5 at the time, and “it’s safe to say we would still support reform like that.” But he’s certain reform won’t come again in a sweeping bill.

Instead, it will happen over time, in pieces.

Lawson pointed to Wisconsin, where certain public unions lived under their own version of SB 5 from 2011 until a [court struck it down in 2024](#). Why did Wisconsin Gov. Scott Walker succeed where Kasich failed? Walker excluded police and fire unions.

“That was a pretty big distinction,” Lawson said. “Dare I say a decisive distinction.”

One bite at time

Republicans have super majorities in Ohio's House and Senate. They hold all statewide elected offices, except for one Supreme Court seat. And President Donald Trump carried the state by double digits in November.

"They're not kids in a candy store. They're kids who own the candy store," said University of Cincinnati Professor David Niven, a former Democratic speechwriter. "They can eat as much they want so long as they don't stuff it all in there at once."

That, he said, was the fatal flaw of SB 5. It unified unions by going after them all at once.

Cropper agreed. Her teachers union's thinking "has always been that if they tried to come after labor again they would do it as death by 1,000 cuts rather than take on everyone at once."

She's not surprised by the bills currently under consideration:

Senate Bill 1: This major overhaul of higher education bans faculty strikes and excludes workload, tenure and program eliminations from bargaining agreements.

"Our biggest concern is the prohibited bargaining subjects," said Sara Kilpatrick, director of Ohio's Conference of American Association of University Professors. "Those are the fundamental terms and conditions over faculty employment."

State Sen. Jerry Cirino, a Kirtland Republican, said strikes violate a contract students have with the state. He compared his bill's ban on higher ed strikes to police and public health workers who can't strike because of the public service nature of their jobs.

"I believe labor has the right to exist and represent employees across the board," Cirino said. "My bill is to protect the students not restrict unions. That is really my focus."

But professor aren't first responders, Ohio AFL-CIO President Tim Burga [wrote in a Feb. 10 letter](#) to Cirino. "This is an affront to unions and the people of Ohio."

Senate Bill 8: "Release times" allow public union members to attend meetings, grievance hearings or negotiations while getting paid by their employer.

"If you're a police officer or a teacher, you should be doing your work," state Sen. Steve Huffman, a Tipp City Republican, said in January. "If they're doing union work, they should be paid by the union."

His bill would ban public unions from negotiating for release times in their contracts. Unions say the practice improves relationships with management and is a “public benefit.”

Right to work: Right-to-work states let employees choose whether they want to join a union and pay dues when they’re hired.

Republicans argue forcing someone to join a teacher’s union when hired is unfair. Unions say non-members reap the rewards of their collective bargaining without paying for it.

Right-to-work legislation hasn’t been introduced yet, but freshman state Rep. Levi Dean, a Green County Republican, started circulating a bill for cosponsors.

“I am proud to take the lead on efforts to give autonomy back to Ohio workers,” Dean said in a statement. “The ‘Right to Work’ bill will protect employees from being forced into unions all while outlining rules for how to navigate labor disputes.”

His bill would make it a third-degree misdemeanor for employee organizations to “recklessly” require membership or collect dues.

It could unite public and private sector employees because it applies to both.

Budget: Gov. Mike DeWine’s budget lets superintendents shuffle teachers to different positions “based on the best interests of the students” --even if that conflicts with “agreements between employee organizations and public employers.”

“It’s not a new thing that they’re taking swipes at union rights,” Ohio Education Association President Scott DiMauro said.

OEA is one of the major unions that represents teachers and support professionals in Ohio’s K-12 schools and colleges.

DiMauro didn’t know whether all these bills were different lawmakers pursuing different agendas or a strategy for reducing union power.

“I think its a fair question to ask,” he said. “We’ll have to wait and see.”

Coordination or coincidence

The biggest proposed change to collect bargaining rights is SB-1, but it’s limited to higher education. And that’s where the bill’s sponsor says his focus will stay.

Cirino's not interested in drafting legislation to change how K-12 teachers negotiate their contracts. Though, Sen. Kristina Roegner told Cleveland.com you could apply Cirino's logic for outlawing professor strikes to K-12 teachers.

That's something Civil Service Employees Association warned about in a legislative update.

The union warned that "every public sector union member in Ohio should be prepared for similar attacks on their union rights."

Cirino wasn't so sure.

"I'll give you my own personal opinion," he said. "I am not sensing that there is any larger scale discussion about dealing with unions. It's not on our list of things we want to accomplish this year."

Lawson at Buckeye had the same impression.

"I think what you've got is a lot of members who see individual things that they want to get done," he said. "I sense it's more of a case-by-case, member-by-member approach."

For Democrats and union leaders, it's all semantics. Coordinated or not, these bills could transform collective bargaining rights.

"There's also a domino effect," Cropper said. "If they come after one group and are successful, then they will come after other groups. It's a slow chip, chip, chip."

Next steps

Overhauling Ohio's public colleges and universities is on a fast track to becoming law, but other bills, like right to work, might not get off the ground.

"It doesn't get a lot of discussion anymore," Lawson said. "I think we have other issues to prioritize right now."

For Ohio's unions, the plan is to stick together.

The coalition that stopped SB 5 still gets together regularly, DiMauro said. And while he understands that mobilizing people around a small, affected group of people is harder, [Gallup has recorded](#) a steady rise in support for unions during the last decade.

“From our perspective, we have the majority of the public on our side,” DiMauro said. “If legislators are going to go down this path to undercut the voices of working people, I don’t think it’s going to turn out well for them.”

Cleveland.com reporter Laura Hancock contributed reporting to this article.