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Taking Aim at Michigan's Middle Class

The decline of the middle class in this country has paralleled that of the labor movement, which has been battered by the relentless efforts of business groups and Republicans to drive down wages, boost corporate profits and inflate executive salaries and bonuses. Now that campaign [is on the verge of a devastating victory in Michigan](#), home of the modern labor movement, which could transform the state's economy for the worse.

On Tuesday, the Republican-controlled Legislature [is expected to pass a law](#) that would allow workers to avoid paying dues to a union that represents their shop. Gov. Rick Snyder, a Republican, has reversed an earlier position and said he would sign the law. Democratic officials, labor leaders and workers are urging him to reconsider, knowing that a business victory in Michigan, of all places, would encourage other states to make the same mistake.

These measures are misleadingly known as “right to work” laws, and their purpose is no less deceptive. Business leaders say workers should not be forced to join a union against their will, but, in fact, workers in Michigan can already opt out of a union. If they benefit from the better wages and benefits negotiated by a union, however, they are required to pay dues or fees, preventing the free riders that would inevitably leave unions without resources.

Concern for the rights of individual workers, of course, is not the real reason business is pushing so hard for these laws. Gutting unions is the fastest way to achieve lower wages and higher profits. Last year, in support of an Indiana antidues laws that later passed, [the Indiana Chamber of Commerce](#) said the law would draw businesses to the state for lower labor costs. [A study by the University of Notre Dame](#) in January found that the average wages and benefits for nonfarm workers in right-to-work states was \$57,732, while in states without the law it was \$65,567. States with antidues laws have higher rates of poverty and lower rates of health coverage.

Republican officials also know that depriving unions of dues will hurt Democratic candidates, who usually win the support of labor. [As President Obama said at a diesel plant in Redford, Mich.](#), on Monday, “These so-called ‘right-to-work’ laws, they don’t have to do with economics, they have everything to do with politics. What they’re really talking about is giving you the right to work for less money.”

Mr. Snyder's turnabout shocked workers in his state, and Democratic officials have spent the last few days urging him to reconsider and prevent a needless drive to the bottom. By withholding his signature, he can ensure that Michigan remains both the birthplace and the economic foundation of middle-class security.