

Worker Protection Bill Would Ban Workplace Discrimination and Promote Social Justice

By Paul Guppy

While the people of Washington and most lawmakers breathlessly await the outcome of closed-door budget negotiations, Sen. Michael Baumgartner has introduced a bill that would promote fairness and social justice for every working person in the state.

SB 5935 would extend right-to-work protections to all workers in the state. Employers would be barred from firing employees who choose not to become members of a private labor organization. The bill says: “The right to work shall not be denied or abridged on account of an employee’s choice not to pay any dues, fee, or other charges of any kind or amount, if not a member, to any labor organization.”

Employers would also be barred from firing employees who do choose to join a private labor organization: “The right to work shall not be denied or abridged on account of an employee’s choice to bargain collectively through a labor organization.”

And employers would be barred from firing or punishing employees who choose not to donate to charities or to political causes selected by the employer or by a private labor organization: “The right to work shall not be denied or abridged on account of an employee’s ... decision not to pay to any charity, political committee, or other third party in lieu of such payments, any amount equivalent to a pro rata portion of dues, fees, or other charges.”

This bill promotes social justice by offering basic protection to workers. No one should be threatened with the loss of their livelihood because they choose not to give part of their pay to an outside charity, cause or organization. The bill would link new worker protections to a proposed increase in the workers’ compensation tax rate. If and when the Department of Labor & Industries raises the tax, employees would receive right-to-work protection at the same time.

Employers should not force their employees to join private organizations, and employees should not be punished based on those with whom they choose to associate. This basic principle is being increasingly recognized across the country. The U.S. Supreme Court recently ruled in favor of a group of California school teachers who argued they should not be forced to pay a special dues increase for the purpose of funding political causes favored by union executives.

In Wisconsin one public-sector union, the Teaching Assistance Association, lost more than two-thirds of its members after a state law giving workers a choice went into effect. “We now live in a reality without [forced] dues,” said one of the union’s co-presidents in explaining the member fall-off. The greater freedom increased the take-home pay of every former union member and, more importantly, the law restored the ability of workers to decide for themselves what private organizations they want to join.

Because of Washington state’s long history of mandatory union membership, many critics will see the bill as controversial, and will try to attack it as “anti-worker.” Yet Michigan and Indiana, where unions once dominated state politics, recently extended legal right-to-work protections to their citizens.

Mandatory union membership is unpopular. Over 90% of private-sector workers already choose not to belong to a labor union, in workplaces where they are allowed a choice. SB 5935 is the most pro-worker bill introduced in years, because it shows respect for the choices that working families make.

Today, many workers are still forced to join a union as a condition of employment. Sen. Baumgartner’s bill would extend equal treatment to all workers, so that in the workplace everyone is treated the same. Three words best describe this important worker protection proposal: Powerful. Fair. Needed.