

FACT SHEET



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Right to Work Destruction Hurts Michigan Employees, Families

In 2023, Gov. Gretchen Whitmer and Her Legislative Cohorts Put Union Political Contributions Over People

by Stan Greer

Three years ago this March, Democrat politicians, wielding razor-thin majorities in the state House and Senate, rubber-stamped legislation to destroy the Wolverine State's decade-old Right to Work law, knowing full well that fellow Democrat Gov. Gretchen Whitmer had vowed to sign such legislation if granted the opportunity. Whitmer never even tried to justify her support or explain how this move would affect the state's economy.

Her reticence may well have been prudent.

After all, a statewide scientific poll¹ conducted at the end of 2022 by the top-rated opinion-research firm SurveyUSA showed that more than 80% of Michigan voters agreed with this statement:

"Workers should never be forced, or coerced, to join a union or pay dues to a union."

The fact is, after many years of economic devastation in Michigan, including 2002-2012, the years immediately preceding passage, the state Right to Work law that took effect in 2013 ushered in a decade of sustained employment growth in key sectors like manufacturing and impressive personal income gains.

From 2002 to 2012, Michigan Lost Nearly 30% of Its Manufacturing Jobs

After looking at the facts, the governor may well have decided that, since it would be impossible to persuade many Michigan citizens that Right to Work destruction was good policy, she wouldn't even try.

But by opting to take the path of evasion, and continuing on it even as she signed the forced-dues scheme that soon arrived on her desk, Whitmer reinforced the perception that this legislation was primarily a means for Democrat politicians in Michigan to reward many of their party's biggest donors.²

Current and historical data furnished by the U.S. Labor Department, the U.S. Commerce Department, and other federal agencies, as well as state government agencies and nonpartisan private researchers, simply won't follow the

narrative concocted by the forced-unionism apologists who successfully prodded Whitmer and her cohorts to destroy Right to Work.

Historical numbers show Michigan was failing to attract and retain well-paid jobs for years and years prior to 2013, when its Right to Work law took effect. More recent data show the state subsequently became a much better place for employees and their families.

For example, from 2002 to 2012, manufacturing employment in forced-unionism Michigan fell by 29.6%.³ Michigan's manufacturing job loss was worse than all but three other states' in percentage terms, and worse than every other state's in absolute terms.

However, over its first few years as a Right to Work state, Michigan enjoyed its strongest manufacturing rebound in decades, with factory employment rising by 80,000 from 2013 to 2018 alone.

Overall, from 2013 through 2022, manufacturing jobs in Michigan grew by 10.9%, twice as rapidly as they did nationwide. Manufacturing employment in the 23 states that still lacked Right to Work laws over the entirety of those nine years grew by just 1.6%, barely more than a seventh as much as in Michigan.

Of course, when the public debate over a Michigan Right to Work law was heating up as businesses struggled to recover from the Great Recession of 2008-9, Big Labor propagandists dismissed any possibility that passing Right to Work and banning forced union dues and fees as a job condition would bring economic benefits to the state.

In fact, in a 2011 "briefing paper,"⁴ the Big Labor-founded Economic Policy Institute went so far as to claim that Right to Work passage would "not boost job growth" in Michigan. The EPI turned out to be dead wrong.

Despite Its False Prophecies, Big Labor 'Think Tank' Continued to Be Cited by Politicians

As they moved to reinstitute forced unionism in 2023, Big Labor politicians in Michigan continued to cite the EPI's propaganda as authoritative,⁵ even though EPI representatives had proven to be completely wrong about

Right to Work.

In addition to strong job growth, there was ample growth in Michigan residents' spending power from 2013 to 2022. It was due in significant part to the anti-inflationary impact, well documented by economists,⁶ of prohibiting compulsory unionism as a job condition.

Overall, the cost of living in Michigan relative to the remaining 23 forced-dues states fell by roughly 6% between 2012, the last year before these protections were instituted, and 2022.

The National Institute for Labor Relations Research has calculated this estimate by drawing on annual state cost-of-living indices furnished by the Missouri Economic Research and Information Center (MERIC), a state government agency.

In 2012, the average after-tax income per capita in forced-unionism Michigan,⁷ adjusted for regional differences in cost of living, was \$36,834 (in current dollars). That was \$45 lower than the average for the 23 states that were non-Right to Work for the entire decade from 2012 to 2022.

By 2022, the average after-tax income per capita in Michigan, adjusted for regional differences in cost of living, had risen to \$54,883 (in current dollars). That was 5.2%, or \$2,736, higher than the non-Right to Work state average.

Unfortunately, the positives of Right to Work for employees seeking better futures for themselves and their families evidently meant little to Big Labor politicians, who focused instead on how much money and manpower for their electoral campaigns they could extract from the union political machine.

Because Right to Work laws make union financial support an individual and voluntary choice, they substantially reduce the amount of money Big Labor can pour into politics.

From the perspective of many union partisans, that fact alone clinches the case against Right to Work laws.

Big Labor Politicians Evidently Don't Care if Businesses and Jobs Flee

For example, in a lengthy article⁸ applauding the return of forced unionism in Michigan, sociology professor Barry Eidlin admitted that Right to Work laws "send a message to employers that a state is 'open for business.'" But from his perspective, "open for business" is a bad thing!

Around the same time, in an interview with *Politico*,⁹ state Sen. Mallory McMorrow (D-Royal Oak) excitedly insisted her state should strive to be the opposite of Right to Work Florida, a job magnet with cost of living-adjusted per capita disposable personal income well above the average for forced-unionism states.¹⁰

Michigan, boasted McMorrow (now a candidate in her party's 2026 U.S. Senate primary), has become the "anti-Florida"!

Since Right to Work destruction took effect in February 2024, Michigan's total seasonally-adjusted employment as measured by the Labor Department's household survey has been in a downward trend, falling by over 50,000 by December 2025, the last month for which data are available as this is written.

From January 2024 through January 2025, unemployment rose in every single Michigan county.¹¹

From February 2024 through December 2025, the Wolverine State's seasonally-adjusted unemployment rate rose from 3.8% to 5.0%, the fifth highest in the nation.

Michigan manufacturing employment, which prior to Right to Work destruction had appeared to be on the verge of fully recovering from the brief, but extremely intense, COVID-19 recession of 2020, now appears to be heading into another period of long-term decline.

Last September, after months of pretending all was well, Gov. Whitmer finally admitted that there were "undeniable signs of an ailing economy" in her state. "Companies are cutting, not creating jobs in Michigan."¹²

In November 2024, the first time Michiganders across the state got a chance to demonstrate at the polls to elected officials who had participated in the execution of Right to Work exactly what they thought about it, they sent a strong signal of displeasure.

Democrat Incumbents Vastly Outspent Pro-Right to Work Challengers, to No Avail

In that election cycle, only seats in the Michigan House of Representatives were up for grabs. Neither Senate seats nor statewide executive officers were. Big Labor Democrats were able to outspend their GOP counterparts by more than two-to-one,¹³ thanks largely to union bosses' largesse.

But the massive, forced dues-fueled union political machine could not prevent the defeats of four anti-Right to Work incumbent representatives. Nor was the union machine able to engineer the defeat of a single lawmaker who had voted to retain Right to Work protections.

Big Labor's defeat in the 2024 elections, and the accompanying loss of control of the House for the Democrat politicians who had rammed through Right to Work destruction a year and half earlier, marked a major step towards restoring the ban on forced union dues and fees as a job condition.

Of course, as long as union-boss lackeys retain control of the state Senate and the governorship in Michigan, Organized Labor bosses will retain the power to get employees fired for refusal to bankroll a union.

But ordinary Michiganders have already made it plain that they, not career politicians, will have the final say on Right to Work.

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Endnotes

¹"Results of SurveyUSA Mkt Research Study #26668," sponsored by the National Institute for Labor Relations Research, November 29, 2022.

²Simon Schuster, "In 'Right-to-Work' Repeal, a Big Win For Democrats' Biggest Donors," *Michigan Live*, March 16, 2023.

³U.S. Labor Department Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), State and Metro Area Employment, Hours, & Earnings.

⁴"Right to Work': The Wrong Answer For Michigan's Economy," Briefing Paper #325, September 15, 2011.

⁵See, e.g., "Senate Democrats Cast Vote to Restore Workers' Rights, Promote Better Wages and Safer Workplaces," March 14, 2023 press release issued by the Michigan state Senate Democrat caucus.

⁶See, e.g., Richard Cebula, James E. Payne, Donnie Horner, and Robert Boylan, "The Impact of Labor Freedom on Geographic Cost of Living Differentials: Controlling For Economic and Quality of Life Factors, 2016," *Journal of Entrepreneurship and Public Policy*, Nov. 2017, Vol. 6, Issue 3, pp. 385-95.

⁷Disposable income per capita data are furnished by the U.S. Commerce Department's Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA).

⁸"Rolling Back 'Right-to-Work' in States Like Michigan Sends a Message to Anti-Union Bosses," *Jacobin*, April 15, 2023.

⁹Adam Wren, "How Michigan Became the Anti-Florida," April 19, 2023.

¹⁰"Michigan to Job-Creating Companies: Go Away," *National Right to Work Newsletter*, June 2023.

¹¹Charity Meier, "Oakland County Faces 'Complicated' Economic Future, Has Good Fundamental Metrics," *C & G Newspapers* (Warren, Mich.), May 27, 2025.

¹²Simon D. Schuster, "Gretchen Whitmer Warns Michigan: 'Undeniable Signs of an Ailing Economy,'" *Bridge Michigan*, September 16, 2025.

¹³*Ibid*, "Michigan House Battle Was Most Expensive Ever. Dems Spent Big, GOP Won Anyway," *Bridge Michigan*, December 6, 2024.