

A Win for Workers, and for Us All

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“As Ohio goes, so goes the nation” has taken on new meaning after this week’s election. The people of Ohio used their citizen veto decisively to repeal legislation that would have stripped police officers, teachers, firefighters and other public workers of most of their collective bargaining rights.

It is the first time in the nation’s history that collective bargaining rights have been upheld on a statewide ballot. And it is a clear sign that Americans understand we can’t rebuild the economy without rebuilding the middle class.

The opposition to the legislation’s partisan overreach went well beyond public employees and union members. More people voted to repeal Senate Bill 5 in November 2011 than voted to elect John Kasich governor a year earlier. That message should not be lost on the legislators who voted to pass it.

Election results from Maine to Mississippi and from Ohio to Arizona demonstrated that voters were fed up with politicians who thought they could exploit a tough economy to advance extremist agendas. The public is crying out for leaders to help get the economy back on track for all Americans.

In Ohio, voters saw the public services that public workers provide as being essential to their communities—whether it was the cop on the beat or the teacher in the classroom. And, implicit in that is the acknowledgment that employees having a voice in their work is a way to ensure and improve the quality of vital public services.

Collective bargaining is a good way to do that. It recognizes that those who do the work should be trusted, not silenced. Throughout Ohio, teachers unions have negotiated provisions to reduce costs; improve teachers’ skills throughout their careers as well as more effectively evaluate them; and ensure that our students have safe schools and the subjects they need, such as art, music and physical education. Throughout the country, collective bargaining is the vehicle by which

some of the best approaches to school reform are taking root, such as the model teacher improvement programs in Pittsburgh and New Haven, Conn., and, in California, the ABC Federation of Teachers’ collaborative approach to closing student achievement gaps.

The citizens’ actions in Ohio and elsewhere show that the public understands that America’s economic crisis was not caused by the salaries and benefits earned by hard-working people who serve the public, but by greed and recklessness at the top of the economic ladder. Public employees in Ohio already have given up \$1 billion in economic

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concessions—the public wants those at the top to share responsibility, as well. Americans want tangible solutions, not scapegoating and stripping people of their rights and voice—whether in the workplace, as in Ohio, or at the ballot box, as in Maine, where voters beat back efforts to curtail voting rights.

On my frequent travels around the country, most recently talking to people in Ohio as part of the incredible grass-

roots effort that connected labor and the broader community, I have been struck by how people from many different walks of life are coming together around common priorities and the common good. They want elected officials to focus on creating jobs, not undercutting working people. They share a belief that the American dream should be available to all and that our leaders must help us achieve that ideal, not stand in its way. It’s the same sense of injustice and unfairness that has inspired people to occupy public spaces from coast to coast, and to demand changes in our economy to level the playing field for ordinary Americans.

These values transcend economic, political and geographic lines. And while they are associated with those coming to be known as the “99 percent”—the teachers, students and parents; the jobless and the underemployed; homeowners and those who have lost their homes, all of whom share a deep love of our country and a commitment to making it better—it will require robust, coordinated and sustained efforts to secure the basic dignity and economic opportunity to which we are all entitled. Victories like this week’s vote in Ohio mark a historic milestone toward achieving this goal, and are a reminder of what is possible when communities unite around important ideals.



Weingarten discussing election issues with voters in Cleveland.