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Michigan's New Corporate Servitude Law: It Takes Away Worker Rights

by George Lakoff

Michigan has just passed a corporate servitude law. It is designed to take away many of the worker rights that unions have conferred throughout their history: the right to a living wage. The right to equal pay for women. The right to deferred payments in the form of pensions. The right to negotiate workplace standards and working conditions. The right to overtime pay.

The law is intended to destroy unions, or at least make them ineffective. It says simply that workers do not have to pay union dues to take a job -- even if they get benefits previously negotiated by a union. Most workers who don't have to pay dues won't pay, and that will defund the unions, killing them and taking away rights unions have fought hard for over generations. Without workers negotiating as a unified group, corporations will not have to grant those union-created rights. Corporations will have take-it-or-leave-it power over individual workers. In short, this is corporate servitude: You do what you are told and take what you are offered.

The deeper truth about unions is that they don't just create and maintain rights for workers; they work for and create crucial rights in society as a whole. Unions created weekends, the eight-hour workday and health benefits. And through their politics, they have been at the center of support for civil rights and other social justice issues. In short, unions don't just work for their members. They work for all of us. Including businesses: Workers are profit creators.

Since Democratic candidates tend to support the same progressive views, defunding unions would take away their power to campaign for Democratic candidates. The new Michigan law is thus also a partisan law supporting the Republican party.

Language matters. Republicans understand this better than Democrats. Republicans have called their corporate servitude law a "right to work" law, as if the law conferred a right instead of taking many away. The first principle of political and social communication in cases of conflict is: avoid the other side's language. The Democrats keep violating this principle, using the Republicans' name for this law. In this way they are helping Republicans, because using the Republican language activates
Republican framing, not just for this law, but for conservative ideology at the deepest level.

Progressives and conservatives have opposing views of democracy. For progressives, democracy is based on citizens caring about each other and acting responsibly on that care, with both individual and social responsibility, to provide through the government protection and empowerment for all. Government thus becomes a means by which citizens pay for public provisions to benefit all: public infrastructure (roads, bridges, hospitals, public buildings), public education, public health and safety (clean air, clean water, safe food, disease protection), a patent office to protection innovations, a justice system, and networks for energy, communication, and transportation. Without all these public provisions, we are not free: Business cannot thrive (if it can operate at all) and we cannot live decent, civilized private lives. It is a deep truth about our democracy: our freedom depends on such public provisions and the private depends on the public. Unions both defend these freedoms and add to them the worker rights unions have created.

Conservatives don’t accept this truth, if they perceive it at all. They tend to see democracy as providing "liberty" -- the liberty to pursue one’s own interests and well-being through personal responsibility, without being responsible for the interests or well-being of others and without others being responsible for them.

From this conservative perspective, businessmen should have the liberty to run their businesses as they please to maximize their profit, and workers should rely on only their personal responsibility to get and keep a job. Unions, for conservatives, thus violate (1) the liberty of business owners to offer workers what is most profitable for the business, (2) the personal responsibility of workers, and (3) the liberty conservatives think workers should have to work without paying union dues.

From the progressive perspective, the new Michigan law is a corporate servitude law, while from the conservative perspective, the law is a "right to work" law.

Language works so that the conservative name "right to work" evokes the conservative political ideology in the brains of those who hear it without wincing. The more an idea is activated in the brain the stronger it gets. Thus, the use of the conservative name strengthens the conservative ideology in the brains of the public.

The press is not being neutral in using the Republican name for the law. Journalists too, in just using the name, are supporting both the Republican framing of the law and conservative ideology. The press is not being balanced -- which is what journalists typically claim to be. Balance would be to use both the names "corporate
servitude law" and "right to work law" and to explain the differences in the progressive and conservative understanding of what the law is and does.

Of course, to do so would change a false view of language that journalists too often internalize, namely, that language is neutral. To see that it isn’t, just try speaking or writing of "Michigan's corporate servitude law" and listen to conservatives scream bloody murder over a truth that does fit their view of democracy. And listen to them keep screaming because it is important to keep repeating the true name of the law if the public is to understand what the law really does.