

## Conservatives Should Ensure Workers A Seat At The Table

*“Community is the product of people working together on problems, of autonomous and collective fulfillment of internal objectives, and of the experience of living under codes of authority which have been set in large degree by the persons involved. . . . People do not come together in significant and lasting associations merely to be together. They come together to do something that cannot easily be done in individual isolation.”*

— Robert Nisbet, *The Quest for Community* (1953)

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American conservatives rightly place economic freedom and limited government among our dearest values. The defense of *markets*, though, has at times made us overly solicitous of *businesses*. As we advocate for owners and managers in their pursuit of profit, and celebrate the enormous benefits their efforts can generate for us all, we must accord the same respect to the concerns of workers and ensure that they too have a seat at the table. In a well-functioning and competitive market, participants meet as equals able to advance their interests through mutually beneficial relationships.

Institutions of organized labor have traditionally been the mechanism by which workers take collective action and gain representation and bargaining power in the private sector. Strong worker representation can make America stronger. Unfortunately, our nation’s Great Depression–era labor laws no longer provide an effective framework, many unions have become unresponsive to workers’ needs and some outright corrupt, and membership has fallen to just 6 percent of the private-sector workforce. Rather than cheer the demise of a once-valuable institution, conservatives should seek reform and reinvigoration of the laws that govern organizing and collective bargaining for three reasons:

**1. Economic Prosperity.** We believe that workers share more fully in our nation’s prosperity when they have a seat at the table. Free markets have proved their unmatched capacity to generate growth, wealth, and innovation, but they offer no guarantee that the gains will reach all participants. We pursue and celebrate tight labor markets because we know that the result is beneficial to workers and their families and communities; likewise, we should support institutions that reinforce those effects through economic agency and self-reliance, rather than retreat to dependence on redistribution.

**2. Limited Government.** We prefer the private ordering of bargains between workers and management to overbearing dictates from Washington. Policymakers have stepped into the void left by workers’ loss of collective representation with a vast and unwieldy edifice of employment regulation. By contrast, when workers have a seat at the table, discussions occur on a level playing field and the parties can make tradeoffs tailored to their circumstances and preferences, rendering much bureaucratic oversight superfluous. Layered *atop* extensive regulation, the process works poorly; as a substitute, it can yield fairer outcomes that better meet people’s needs.

**3. Strong Communities.** We consider solidarity indispensable to the health of our communities and the nation. Well-functioning private-sector worker organizations are vital mediating institutions for establishing stronger bonds among workers, facilitating mutual aid, and affording meaningful participation in the public square. Giving workers a seat at the table also fosters shared understanding and mutual respect between workers and the managers, owners, and political leaders who have become socially and economically isolated from the American mainstream.

The standard partisan arguments over labor have tended to accept our nation's current legal framework as the only one, and thus to present its expansion or contraction as the only options. Entirely different arrangements deserve consideration. In parts of Europe, for instance, "right-to-work" is the norm, but so is sectoral bargaining. On one hand, labor and management in Germany often partner on "works councils," which are illegal in the United States and opposed by American labor unions. On the other hand, such "co-determination" can also extend to labor holding seats on corporate boards, which American unions support but shareholders resist. In some places, unions manage functions like unemployment insurance and job training that we take for granted as government responsibilities. In Canada, collective bargaining offers the parties autonomy to depart from government mandates in regulating their own workplaces.

Conservatives should be willing to consider all these approaches, and others besides. We endorse no specific proposal, but believe that various combinations hold the potential for substantive reform that would advance our priorities of improving the lives of workers and their families, deepening our communities, and strengthening the nation. We are eager to pursue discussions with policymakers from across the political spectrum and representatives from all facets of the economy. Here, too, workers must have a seat at the table.

Sincerely,

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