

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis Targets Teachers' Unions in a Recent Blow to the Labor Movement



Florida Governor Ron DeSantis has recently signed a bill that poses a significant challenge to the labor movement, specifically targeting teachers' unions and public sector employees. The bill, signed on May 9, prohibits automatic deductions of union dues from the paychecks of teachers and government workers, instead mandating separate payments to the unions. Labor experts view this move as part of a broader attack on the right to collective bargaining and a deliberate attempt to make it more difficult for public workers to join or maintain their unions.

The impact of this bill extends beyond public sector unions, with potential repercussions for the overall labor movement and even democracy itself, warns Sharon Block, an executive director at Harvard Law School. Weakening or discouraging the formation of public sector unions may discourage individuals from pursuing careers in public service. The bill primarily focuses on public sector unions, although it exempts law enforcement, correctional officer, and firefighter unions. However, the implications of the legislation reach far beyond these specific sectors.

This bill is not an isolated incident but rather part of a larger trend observed in various states. Kentucky and Arkansas have already passed similar bills, rolling back payroll deductions for public sector union employees. In Tennessee, a bill raising teacher salaries includes an amendment prohibiting the deduction of union dues from paychecks. These bills collectively pose a risk of weakening unions that rely on regular dues payments for their organizational activities, negotiations, and other essential functions.

Historically, the public sector has had a higher rate of union membership compared to the private sector. In 2022, while the union membership rate among private sector workers was 6%, the rate for public sector workers was more than five times higher at 33%. However, the union membership rate has been gradually declining. In 2002, the public sector's union membership rate stood at 37.5%, while the private sector's rate was 8.5%.

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Teachers' unions are particularly prominent within the public sector, with approximately 70% of teachers in the United States being members of a union or employees' association. However, the union membership rates can vary by region. The Florida bill includes a provision that targets teacher membership rates, requiring a union to recertify with the state if fewer than 60% of eligible employees are members (previously the cutoff was 50%). Failure to meet this threshold may result in the decertification of the union as the workers' bargaining representative. While the Florida Education Association boasts over 150,000 members, the union rates differ by county. For instance, the president of Orange County's Classroom Teachers' Association reported a membership rate of around 57%.

Governor DeSantis defends the bill as a measure to provide teachers with more "freedom" and keep more money in their pockets. However, labor experts view it as a clear assault on unions and an attempt to weaken his opponents. Teachers' unions have been involved in conflicts with DeSantis on multiple issues, ranging from his reelection campaign to COVID-19 mask mandates. In response, teachers' unions have already filed lawsuits challenging the recent law, citing it as "retaliation."

This legislation aligns with a long-standing campaign against labor unions, initially focusing on the private sector labor movement. Union membership in the private sector has experienced a significant decline, with only 6% of private sector workers currently being unionized compared to about one-third in the 1950s. The Supreme Court's 2018 Janus decision marked a turning point in the battle against public sector unions. The ruling stated that public employees were not obligated to pay union fees to cover collective bargaining costs, even if that bargaining covered them. This decision overturned four decades of precedent that mandated such fees.

The Janus decision triggered a loss of thousands of fee-payers for unions. However, concerted efforts by union supporters mitigated the impact to some extent. Despite this resilience, labor experts remain concerned about the trend of bills targeting public unions. They argue that these bills are part of a deliberate campaign to undermine the overall labor movement. The historical connection between a strong labor movement, a thriving middle class, and a vibrant democracy underscores the importance of safeguarding workers' rights and representation.

The bill signed by Governor Ron DeSantis in Florida represents a significant blow to teachers' unions and the broader labor movement. By banning automatic payroll deductions and imposing separate payments, the bill adds friction to the union membership process for teachers and public sector employees. This legislation is part of a wider trend observed in various states, aiming to weaken public sector unions and their ability to organize and negotiate on behalf of workers. The implications of these bills extend beyond the labor movement, potentially impacting the attractiveness of public service careers and challenging the principles of democracy.