

Group: Curbing public unions won't fix budget

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Republicans won't be able to alleviate Ohio's budget crisis by weakening the power of government-worker unions to bargain collectively for their members, a liberal policy group said yesterday.

Policy Matters Ohio said the nine states that don't allow unions to negotiate wages and benefits for members have budget deficits averaging 16.5 percent of revenue. The 15 states that grant unions full collective-bargaining authority have deficits averaging 16.2 percent of revenue, the group said.

"Some would use budget problems as an excuse to deny public-sector workers their collective-bargaining rights," said Wendy Patton, senior associate at Policy Matters Ohio. "The right of workers to bargain collectively is not the cause of budget problems."

Policy Matters Ohio released its report as Ohio's incoming Republican leaders plan to scrutinize, and possibly weaken, a 1983 law that empowers unions to negotiate on behalf of teachers, police and firefighters, sanitation workers, accounting clerks and a variety of other public employees.

Gov.-elect John Kasich and his Republican legislative allies say the reforms would help drive down labor costs for state and local governments.

Sen. Shannon Jones, R-Springboro, plans to introduce a bill that would eliminate collective bargaining for state workers and weaken unions' bargaining power at the local level.

Jones said yesterday that she's not pitching the idea as the solution to Ohio's budget woes.

"Nobody disagrees with the fact that we are in a time of declining revenues," Jones said. "This is about giving management the ability to manage the largest cost in state and local government, and that is its work force."

Such rhetoric masks the politicians' true agenda, said D. John Russo, coordinator of the Labor Studies Program and co-director of the Center for Working Class Studies at Youngstown State University.

"The goal is to divide different groups of working people against one another," he said.

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