PUBLIC UNION: PUBLIC ENEMY

AKASH CHOUGULE

How would you like to fund politicians with whom you strongly disagree?

Not interested? How about if I... forced you? How would I do that?

Well, what if I said, "If you don't pay, you lose your job."

For decades, millions of state and local government workers—police, firefighters, teachers, and others—have been forced to make that choice.

And who forces them? Public-sector unions; that is, unions who represent public-sector employees. How? It's pretty straightforward.

First, they demand employees pay hundreds of dollars in union dues as a condition of employment—meaning if they don't pay, they get fired. Next, they use that money to support and elect union-friendly politicians. Then they negotiate contracts with those same politicians—kind of like negotiating with yourself. It's a sweet deal—unless you're a worker who doesn't agree with those union-friendly politicians. Or the taxpayer who has to foot the bill for those union contracts.

This game plan is not a secret. Here's what the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees say on their website: "We elect our bosses, so we've got to elect politicians who support us and hold those politicians accountable."

These perverse incentives might help explain why, for most of American history, pretty much no one thought that unionizing government workers was a good idea.

This includes liberal icon President Franklin Roosevelt. Roosevelt was a very strong supporter of private-sector unions, but a very strong opponent of public-sector unions. Here's what he said on the subject in 1937: "All Government employees should realize that the process of collective bargaining...cannot be transplanted into the public service..."

Roosevelt recognized that public-sector unions could hold the government hostage at will. They could simply threaten to walk off the job if they didn't get what they wanted. Sanitation workers, for example, could put public health at risk by refusing to collect the garbage. Other public employees would have similarly disruptive power. This was, Roosevelt believed, "unthinkable and intolerable."

In 1943, New York state's highest court agreed, calling government unions "not only incompatible with the spirit of democracy, but inconsistent with every principle upon which our government is founded."

In the late 1950s, New York City and Wisconsin defied this view and allowed their public employees to unionize. But it was President John F. Kennedy who opened the floodgates. In order to win the support of union leadership in the 1960 presidential election, he promised to allow federal employees to unionize—and fulfilled that promise with Executive Order 10988 in 1962. It was a shrewd political move, but a bad deal for the country, and its consequences are still being felt today as public-sector unionization spread rapidly in the decades that followed.

Today, unions wield tremendous power in government. Try to fire a poor-performing government worker in New York City or Los Angeles. Or almost any unionized government employee anywhere. It's extremely difficult—if not impossible—no matter how incompetent they might be. According to one union contract in Michigan, employees could be caught drunk at work five times before being fired.

And then there are the pension plans—income paid out to government workers after they retire. Pensions barely exist in the private sector anymore. They're much too expensive. But they're standard for public-sector unions, and have bankrupted cities like Detroit, and have government-union-heavy states like Illinois on the brink of financial calamity.

Unfunded pension obligations—that is, money that the government doesn't have but has promised to government retirees—are anywhere from four to six trillion dollars nationwide. Over $250 billion of that belongs to Illinois alone.

But fortunately, there is some hope. Today, 28 states have passed "right-to-work" laws stating that no worker can be forced to join or pay a union as a condition of employment.

When joining and paying the union becomes voluntary, the same thing invariably happens: workers leave in droves. And thus, the union's ability to manipulate the system declines sharply.

Now the US Supreme Court has extended this right to public employees in the other 22 states as well. In Janus v. The American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, the Court ruled that public employees cannot be compelled to pay union dues against their will.

Millions of public employees don't want to be pawns for the union agenda. Thanks to this ruling, they no longer have to be.

And we, the taxpayers, have a fresh opportunity to make sure that our politicians work for us—not the unions.

I'm Akash Chougule, Senior Policy Fellow at Americans for Prosperity, for Prager University.