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## Unions: How they lost their power

The heyday of the “private-sector union is gone,” said Charles Krauthammer in *The Washington Post*. The most recent proof of that came last week when Michigan, the birthplace of the powerful United Auto Workers union, passed a right-to-work law, which prevents unions from forcing workers to join the union and pay dues. Indiana passed a similar union-busting bill earlier this year, joining 22 other states that are recognizing that in the age of fierce global competition, high-wage, no-flexibility unions cripple businesses. In the 1980s, unions represented 20 percent of all private workers; now it’s down to 7 percent. The unions lost because they overplayed their hand, said Kimberley A. Strassel in *The Wall Street Journal*. Forcing workers to join unions by law rubs most Americans the wrong way. In Michigan and other economically struggling states, people want “more freedom for workers” and employers—and the greater number of jobs that follow.

Those jobs, if they do come, are likely to be “lower-paying, less secure, and less likely to offer health-care and pension benefits,” said Thomas J. Sugrue in *The New York Times*. It’s not a coincidence that as unions have declined, middle-class incomes have also declined since the 1980s. If

a family can’t support itself on what union-free employers choose to pay, what happens to them? asked *The Baltimore Sun* in an editorial. They are forced to turn to “government safety-net programs such as Medicaid and food stamps.” That’s why conservative attacks on labor make such little sense. Passing laws that cut workers’ wages and benefits may boost profits in the short term, but it takes money out of the pockets of middle-class consumers, and makes them dependent on government handouts.

Right-to-work laws are not the reason for labor’s decline, said Steve Chapman in the *Chicago Tribune*. Instead, powerful global forces have undermined industries where unions once reigned supreme—“as the industries have gotten weaker, so have the unions.” After World War II, America dominated a shattered world and the Big Three owned the auto market. They handed over fat raises to UAW workers, passing on the added costs to consumers. Global competition ended that prerogative—and over time, will continue to erode what’s left of union power. All the shouting over right-to-work laws in state capitals “makes for great theater, but for the most part, theater is all it is.”

Gentry