

THE INDIANAPOLIS STAR

Indianapolis, Indiana • January 17, 2011

NFL Players Union on Wrong Side of RTW

By Matt. E. Ryan

Every January, a wide swath of America sits down to enjoy the NFL playoffs. If it's not an annual rite of passage, it's certainly close. This January, however, the NFL Players Association extended itself into uncharted territory: the debate over right to work legislation. Unfortunately, their rhetoric suggests they're better suited to deal with issues on the gridiron.

In a statement criticizing proposed right to work legislation in Indiana — which would allow workers to abstain from joining a union — the NFL Players Association claimed that they “know what it means to fight for workers’ rights.” Such a statement highlights the inconsistent position held by those arguing against right to work legislation on the basis of “rights.”

It is often assumed that one's position on unions automatically dictates his or her opinion on right to work legislation: The prototypical “pro-union” individual would be against right to work laws; conversely, the prototypical “anti-union” individual would support right to work laws. In fact, neither stance is consistent with itself. The only rational stance is to be in favor of both unions and right to work legislation.

Labor unions, at their core, are voluntary organizations that provide what economists call “club goods” — benefits more efficiently provided to a group of people rather than individuals. While one of these benefits is the ability to negotiate for better wages, a quick look at the AFL-CIO website shows a whole host of additional club goods, from college planning to retirement services. There's even a union-specific bank.

From a rights standpoint, it is crucial that individuals have the liberty to organize themselves as they choose. Almost everyone is part of some sort of voluntary organization — a religious or political group, a country club, an organization in school. Voluntary interaction has been the foundation of centuries of

economic progress; preventing it is to take a distinct step backward.

But this same liberty should not end at the boundary of the labor union. Just as individuals have the right to associate as a labor union, so too do individuals have the right to abstain from joining a labor union or from being coerced into paying dues to a union they don't wish to associate with. Right to work legislation helps maintain this liberty for all workers.

In arguing for workers' rights, the NFLPA looks past the issue of rights and focuses instead on outcomes, citing lower incomes for workers in right to work states. But statistics can be marshaled to support a range of positions. For instance, a simple perusal of employment statistics shows that wage growth in right to work states has been stronger than in those states without right to work protection over the last decade, and that unemployment is generally about a half of a percentage point lower in right to work states.

Cherry-picking statistics without an underlying theory is a dangerous practice; after all, economic outcomes vary across states for a wide range of reasons. To make a blanket statement in the manner of the players union — that right to work legislation has been harmful to the average worker by citing a single statistic — is irresponsible. Increasing liberty enhances, not reduces, economic outcomes — and right to work legislation serves as a crucial protection of the liberty of those workers choosing not to join a union.

I love the NFL and I'm pleased the NFLPA is making strides toward taking care of retired football players. But they shouldn't advocate for policies that reduce the freedom of the very workers who allow them to play the game they love for a living.

Ryan is an assistant professor of economics at Duquesne University.