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Sent: Monday, April 11, 2011 10:37 AM
To: Ferguson, John H.
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 NEWS - LOCAL

Sunday, Apr. 10, 2011

Anti-union fight intensifies in S.C.

Critics: Effort distracts from real issues

By Gina Smith - McClatchy Newspapers

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TEXT SIZE:   

COLUMBIA -- Gov. Nikki Haley and the Republican-controlled legislature are working with increasing fervor to ensure that South Carolina - long an anti-union state - is a place where businesses can set up and grow without fear of organized labor.

But with only 4.6 percent of the state's work force members of unions, state employees barred from organizing and no efforts under way to change the state's right-to-work status, are unions a real threat to businesses?

Some Democrats and union leaders say the focus this year on anti-union legislation is a political ploy to distract South Carolinians from the real problems plaguing the state.

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But Republicans and some business officials say the focus is a preventative measure that will help pave the way for the state's economic recovery.

To that end, S.C. politicians are working to shut out unions. Consider:

State lawmakers are considering a bill to exempt S.C. businesses from a proposed federal rule that would require them to notify workers of their rights to unionize.

Haley has been sued in federal court by a machinists union for saying the state would try to keep unions out of the Boeing plant in North Charleston. Plane maker Boeing chose the North Charleston site last year over one in Washington state because of South

Carolina's nonunion workers and state incentives given by legislators. The plant is the largest single industrial investment in state history.

S.C. voters overwhelmingly approved a change in the state Constitution last November, guaranteeing workers the right to secret ballots in union elections. The National Labor Relations Board has threatened to sue South Carolina, claiming the change is against federal law.

Anti-union forces in South Carolina say they are nervous that President Obama and his appointees could create new federal rules that provide new ins for unions.

"That's how they're going to try and get in," said Lewis Gossett, a labor lawyer who runs the S.C. Manufacturers Alliance.

Meanwhile, Democrats point to dwindling union enrollment across the nation and a growing anti-union sentiment, and they see no reason to fear.

"Where's the threat? There isn't one," said state Rep. Gilda Cobb-Hunter, D-Orangeburg. "It's the most ridiculous marketing tool I've ever seen. It's a wedge issue to keep people unfocused and not paying attention to the fact we're not creating jobs, not helping education, not making the kind of changes that would improve this state."

Cobb-Hunter credits unions with helping build the nation's middle class. But, she added, they are losing steam to the point that most business owners have no need to worry. "I don't think any company that pays a fair, livable wage and provides a good, safe working environment has anything to worry about from unions," Cobb-Hunter said.

But J.J. Darby, director of the S.C. chapter of the small-business group the National Federation of Independent Business, said unions have attempted to set up shop in small businesses in the past several years in Greenville and Charleston.

"We're aware there is activity, and it is causing our small businesses concern," he said. "And it's happening in small businesses, and it's happening in businesses not associated with manufacturing. It's across the board."

Gossett, of the S.C. Manufacturers Association, said unions have no choice but to try to make in-roads into the South.

"Drive through the Midwest and the Northeast and look at unions' record - closed factories, one after the other, destroyed in part by the inflexibility of union contracts," said Gossett, whose membership is overwhelmingly union-free. "They have declined in membership to the point that they have nowhere else to go. If you're looking for a place to grow, you can't go back to the places where you destroyed the industries. You want to come to places like here."

But Erin McKee, vice president of the S.C. chapter of the AFL-CIO, an umbrella group of unionized workers, said she rarely hears of unions trying to get into South Carolina or expand.

"South Carolina is a tough place to set up a union," said McKee, of Charleston. "The biggest obstacle is usually that people get scared. They want help, but they worry they'll get fired if they organize. And that's often the end of the unionization effort."

McKee points to examples where unions have increased safety in workplaces, raised salaries and given workers a voice. Despite that, she said, South Carolina is increasingly anti-union.

"I don't understand it. I think we're moving in a direction where our governor and others would be happy if everybody worked for \$8 an hour with no benefits," she said.

South Carolina has opposed unions since about the 1880s, according to Hoyt Wheeler, a retired USC professor and labor expert. Then, the promise of cheap, nonunion labor lured textile companies to the South from New England.

That anti-union sentiment still can be felt today.

Teachers and all other state employees do not have the right to collectively bargain or strike. South Carolina is also a right-to-work state, meaning it is illegal to require union membership or dues payment as a condition of employment in the state.

The result: South Carolina has the sixth-lowest percentage of union members in the country, tied with Virginia. North Carolina has the lowest, according to 2010 data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

"South Carolina has had the same strategy since the 1880s," Wheeler said. "But the whole idea of offering cheap labor is not a competitive strategy anymore. China? India? We can't compete on that [wage] front anymore. I think South Carolina has other, better things it can offer than this."

Business leaders say they are working to market the state on many fronts. But, they say, the state must hold the line on unions at the same time to remain competitive.

"It's about flexibility for our businesses. It's about the fact that one company after another has died because of inflexible union work rules," Gossett said. "In a global economy, you can't afford to work under those kinds of scenarios. You have to be able to work directly with your employees."



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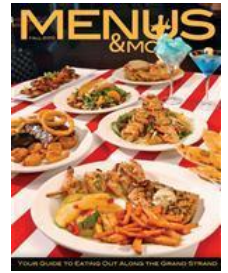
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