

Business takes priority over common sense

Creating jobs isn't enough; those jobs should be safe and fair.



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Guest columnist

It would be difficult to find a business in Maine with a longer history of workplace violations, disregard for laws and lack of respect for its workers and its community than the former DeCoster Egg Farm in Turner. And yet, despite all of that history, the state Legislature just passed a bill to take away the egg farm's workers' rights to organize.

While I understand the need to encourage more business growth in Maine, that gift recently bestowed to arguably the state's worst workplace offender seems like one step too far.

The former DeCoster Egg Farm seems to have hit on every possible violation out there. Through the years, DeCoster has been reported for minimum wage and overtime violations, human rights violations, workplace injuries and deaths, lack of safety equipment, hiring illegal immigrants, animal cruelty and exploitation and terrorism of workers and workers' supporters.

People employed at DeCoster had to work in bad conditions with toxic air contaminants without any masks or protective gear. They worked around unguarded machines, exposed electrical parts and unstable, partially collapsed buildings. For an entire 10 years, they

worked around the horrific smell of a hundred thousand rotting chicken corpses. The fly population grew so large, workers had to create fly paper by dipping duct tape into pesticide without proper training or safety equipment.

Considering the lack of cleanliness, the lack of training and the disregard for worker — and chicken — health, it is no wonder DeCoster eggs operating in Iowa caused a national salmonella outbreak affecting nearly 2,000 people in 2010. Though this outbreak didn't come from the Maine farm, a quick read of the Maine farm's history makes it quite impressive that it didn't.

Through the years, DeCoster has paid millions of dollars in hundreds of penalties and claims. Even under the new ownership, Moark LLC, a division of Land O'Lakes Inc., an incident happened in November of this past year when a worker lost two fingers in an accident that is now under investigation.

With this incredible history, it is inconceivable to me that the Maine Legislature just voted to approve a bill that would take away the rights of work-

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ers to unionize there. If anyone needed to find a way to protect themselves, it would be the workers at DeCoster.

That vote makes me wonder just how "business friendly" we want our state to be?

Are we so eager to bend over backward that we are willing to take away workers' long-standing rights and effectively put business priorities above all else? Above our workers, above our communities, above our safety?

Letting the workers at DeCoster retain their right to organize gave them at least the possibility of fighting for a decent workplace environment.

We are not talking about "entitlements" or "special rights" here, we're talking about very basic rights. The right to be able to wear proper safety equipment, to not have to worry about electrocution while working, to be able to breathe safely.

We are talking about the right of workers to get paid minimum wage and get paid for the hours they work. We are talking about the right of workers to be able to meet with legal aid attorneys when they need to without getting harassed, the right of women workers to

not be sexually harassed, and the right of all workers to be free to work without intimidation.

The efforts of our state Legislature to support the growth of business in Maine should not stop at the creation of jobs. It should continue to make sure those jobs are, at the very basic level, safe and fair.

While we can certainly hope that Land O'Lakes will run the farm better than DeCoster, there is nothing saying it will, or has to. Only the employees can speak up, but individually, they have less power than they can have as a group.

Eliminating the right of workers at this egg farm to unionize does nothing to contribute to the state's economy. It does not create jobs. It does not grow business. It does not enhance our communities. All it does is eliminate the one recourse these workers have to fight against the grossly unfair treatment they have dealt with for decades.

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