

Ken Hall: Let's fix W.Va.'s economy

By Ken Hall

An article by David Gutman reported various findings of a poll conducted by Orion Strategies. One result in particular I would like to point out is the Republican-led state Legislature had an approval rating of just 31 percent. This didn't come as a surprise to me and shouldn't to most West Virginians.

The article points to one very clear reason why that may be — the poll numbers for the right-to-work legislation, the Legislature's "chief accomplishment."

The Orion poll of likely West Virginia voters found that "[o]nly 32 percent believe it would help the state's economy, while 47 percent believe it will hurt."

Yes, the first bill out of the gate by lead sponsor Senate President Bill Cole, the presumptive Republican candidate for Governor, was a supposed magic elixir to "fix" the state's economy that instead weakens workers' bargaining power.

A companion bill, which eliminated prevailing wages on public construction jobs, also passed. This one-two punch will somehow jump start our economy by lowering wages? How does lowering wages help our state's economy?

These bills are written and designed by out-of-state corporate interests to push their anti-worker agenda across the United States opportunistically when their political stars align. All recent right-to-work state laws have been passed by Republican-controlled legislatures and governors (or over the veto of a Democratic governor).

Do these corporate elites actually care about the West Virginian economy? Does the Republican leadership actually care about the state's economy? The answer to the first question is clearly "no" unless lowering wages is a good thing.

If lowering wages is the chief accomplishment of the Republican Legislature to date, what additional steps are Senate President Cole and House Speaker Tim Armstead actually taking to solve our economic woes?

During the right-to-work debate, proponents said our economy is so bad off that everything needs to be on the table to fix our problems. Things are bad — we have projected budget deficits exceeding \$800 million through fiscal year 2017 and public employees and retirees are facing draconian cuts in health care coverage because the Legislature has failed to adequately fund the Public Employee Insurance Agency.

Yet the Republican-controlled Legislature has spent most of its time proposing and discussing tax breaks for corporate America and such economic juggernaut items as allowing the sale of unpasteurized milk and requiring that official business and records of the state be conducted in English. Regardless of where you stand on these issues, we have a real economic crisis in our state and we need robust bipartisan political leadership to tackle the hard problems we face due to a declining coal industry, underfunded education system and crumbling roads.

So it's reasonable to come to the conclusion that the Republican leadership is out-of-touch with the

needs of the West Virginian economy and is happy to do the political bidding of the out-of-state corporate elite.

As West Virginians go to polls this year, one thing is clear. We deserve better leadership in the Legislature and need to vote for candidates that are prepared to tackle the tough issues of improving our economy and the livelihoods of the proud working people of our state.

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