
Kenny Perdue: State, local candidates have deep effect on working people (Gazette)

By Kenny Perdue

In these final days leading up to the primary election, it's been gratifying to see that, despite the small role our state plays in the selection of president, that presidential candidates realize the importance of wooing West Virginia voters, and are visiting our state.

West Virginia, filled with working families fighting hard to overcome one economic barrier after another, is a snapshot of what so many communities across the country are facing. We are helping to keep the conversation focused on the issues that are important to our nation's struggling middle class.

But let's face it: Despite all the noise, rhetoric and excitement generated at the national level, the state and local elections are the races that will directly and meaningfully affect West Virginians.

Therefore, I would like to remind voters of what is at stake.

The Republican West Virginia legislative leadership, tearing out the most destructive and mean-spirited pages from the national Republican Party's corporate-funded playbook, spent the past two legislative sessions attacking working West Virginians in order to prop up the wealthy few.

The sole goal of their much-heralded bills "Right to Work" and repeal of prevailing wage is simply to lower wages for workers. Period. Remember the 2015 legislative session — when the Legislature rolled back mine safety standards to help coal executives save money? Then there was the bill they passed to provide increased legal protection to employers that knowingly endanger their workers by failing to perform inspections, ignoring safety regulation violations or allowing other unsafe conditions. It was clear from the beginning who the new Republican legislative leadership is working for.

After the Legislature spent the first half of the 2016 legislative session wallowing in the divisiveness and confusion surrounding right to work and elimination of the state prevailing wage, the leadership then made sure lawmakers spent the remainder of that session arguing over other polarizing social-issue legislation that did absolutely nothing to create jobs or help working families succeed.

Meanwhile, the leadership has failed to propose a solution to the long-term debt facing the West Virginia Public Employee Insurance Agency, which affects more than 230,000 public workers and retirees, as well as all West Virginia taxpayers.

While members from the minority party repeatedly attempted to force the Legislature to act on PEIA during the session, the Republican leadership kept stating that they had a fix for the critical problem. Instead, the Senate passed a budget that assumed a tobacco tax increase and road funding revenue hinging on bills the House of Delegates had already rejected — in other words, a budget that clearly could not be sustained. As a result, the Legislature ended the regular session with no agreement on a state budget, leaving PEIA woefully underfunded.

With the Legislature at an impasse over generating any new revenue, and still no state budget as we

move perilously close to the end of the current fiscal year, we have to assume the worst: large-scale premium increases and long-term massive debt.

Was the plan all along to provide only a Band-Aid solution while saddling state employees who haven't had a raise in years and retirees who've never had an increase in their pensions with these increases? At this point, it seems inevitable that the leadership will follow through on a Republican Party official's previously stated goal of laying off 15,000 public employees.

So now, on the eve of the 2016 primary election, it is imperative that we move past the hype generated at the national level and look carefully down the ballot at the candidates who will be directly acting for, or against, our best interests.

I urge all West Virginia voters to closely examine those candidates at the state and local level and determine which ones truly support the working men and women of this state and will seek to help us support our families. Our state's future depends on it.

Kenny Perdue is president of the West Virginia AFL-CIO.