

Chris Regan: Republican repeal of prevailing wage a quadruple loser for W.Va.

By Chris Regan

West Virginia's new Republican majority doesn't lack ambition. Its radical agenda includes being the first Legislature in over half a century to roll back safety in the coal mines. It has moved to make nursing home corporations unaccountable for abuse and neglect toward our seniors. It means to undermine and then end the right of workers to have a voice in their workplace rules and conditions.

But no one bill illustrates the extreme hostility Republican leadership has for working West Virginians more than the repeal of the prevailing wage law. The repeal of this law hurts West Virginia at least four separate ways, while giving our state nothing in return. All the beneficiaries of this ill-advised repeal are out-of-state companies, and all its victims are taxpayers and wage earners in West Virginia.

To recap, prevailing wage is a law that provides that when the government contracts to have roads, bridges, or schools built, the contractors we, the people, hire must pay a fair "prevailing" wage to the workers. The wage is calculated by the government. Companies that bid for state work know in advance what it will be.

The law is a win for West Virginia in several ways: It supports good paying construction jobs; it keeps in-state contractors competitive; it ensures quality work gets done on public projects; and it keeps tax money in West Virginia.

Repeal would turn all these benefits into negatives for us. As local companies and workers tried to tell the Republicans when visiting the Capitol the last two weeks, the prevailing wage law helps them pay West Virginia workers a good, livable wage without worrying that a bottom-feeding, out-of-state company will undercut those wages. Republicans actually mean to cut wages for our own workers.

Without the prevailing wage law, our homegrown construction businesses would have to drastically cut their worker's pay or avoid bidding on our own state's projects altogether. Critically, when West Virginia companies win the state's business, that money stays in West Virginia. We get some back from the company in taxes and even more back as those companies spend, grow, and invest right here.

Prevailing wage also ensures quality. When you need a doctor for your child, you don't ask, "Who is the absolute cheapest doc we can get?" Our safety depends on quality in roads, bridges, schools and other infrastructure. Bringing in the lowest-paid, least-skilled people for the jobs puts our families in danger needlessly. We should trust the workers who live in our communities to build those communities.

Finally, in addition to returning tax money from the local businesses that work for West Virginia to the state, the West Virginia workers who earn the prevailing wage will also pay taxes, and more importantly, spend their money here. That spending supports other businesses like restaurants and home builders and supports the whole economy.

There are no countervailing benefits to offset these harms to West Virginia. In states that have repealed prevailing wage, construction costs do not go down. The wage difference is simply captured by the new companies coming in to take the work. Repealing prevailing wage makes no more economic sense

than hiring Ohio truckers to haul dump trucks full of money out of our state, drop it off in Richmond, Harrisburg, and Columbus, and then send us all a bill for the trouble.

By this point, you must be thinking, why would the West Virginia Republicans even think of such a destructive change to our law? The answer is simple: They didn't. The repeal of prevailing wage is part of a national agenda funded by the largest companies in the world. You may know this agenda by the name "ALEC," the name "Koch Brothers" or not know it at all, but make no mistake, this idea didn't originate in West Virginia any more than did the people who paid \$25,000 a plate to have dinner with the new extreme Republican lawmakers we have.

If prevailing wage is repealed, West Virginia companies will lose our own state's business. West Virginia workers will suffer deep pay cuts, or lose their jobs altogether. If you are represented by a Republican in our Legislature, you might want to ask them why they think they were elected to do that.

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