
Ken Hall: Right to work is wrong for West Virginia

By Ken Hall

West Virginia citizens are correct to be skeptical of politicians proposing a right-to-work law.

Right to work isn't what supporters pretend it is. The term was chosen by clever PR people to confuse the public about its true meaning. Right to work has nothing to do with 'rights' or 'freedom' to work.

The government doesn't force the Chamber of Commerce to represent businesses that don't pay membership fees. The government doesn't force cable companies to provide services to people who don't pay them. Right-to-work proponents want the government to force unions to represent workers who don't pay dues.

The law already says no one in West Virginia can be required to join a union. Right now, businesses and employees are free to negotiate union representation as part of their contract. If this law passes, it will mean that West Virginia's government is interfering in the rights of an employer and employee to negotiate what works for them.

Right-to-work proposals are supported by the same out-of-state billionaires and CEOs who are buying up West Virginia's natural resources and taking tax breaks to ship jobs overseas. The notorious Koch brothers and other out-of-state donors are spending millions of dollars to bring right-to-work laws to West Virginia and other states. They want to weaken unions so they can lower workers' wages, gut workers' pensions, ignore workplace safety and fatten their own wallets.

Workers will be reluctant to speak up about workplace safety problems, like the kinds that led to the Upper Big Branch mining tragedy or the Elk River chemical spill.

It isn't just union members who would be affected by a right-to-work law in West Virginia. Such a law would erode the power of collective bargaining and bring down wages and standards for all of us.

Even right-to-work supporters sometimes slip and admit it lowers wages. Statistics show right to work lowers wages by an average of \$5,000. And six of the top 10 states with high unemployment are right-to-work states.

Take it from Stanley Greer, spokesman for the National Right to Work Committee. He actually said, "We're not purporting to prove that right to work produces superior economic performance."

West Virginians don't need government getting in the way, and they don't need legislators bringing up divisive issues like right to work. West Virginians need their political leaders to work on improving the economy, raising wages and making sure our children receive the best education possible.

Ken Hall is president of Teamsters Local 175.