

Christopher Regan: Taxpayer money wasted on theatrics by leaders of W.Va. House, Senate

By Christopher Regan

This past winter, Sen. Bill Cole and Delegate Tim Armstead united construction owners and businesses with their workers. They brought thousands of outraged West Virginians to our Capitol to denounce Republican anti-wage legislation. Cole and Armstead even unified the often-fractious Democratic Party with a GOP bill that threatened to hurt working West Virginia families and give us nothing in return — the repeal of prevailing wage.

After seeing the justified outrage at what they were doing, intentionally seeking a pay cut for dedicated construction workers and their families, Cole and Armstead backed down some. But, afraid to be embarrassed with a full retreat, they demanded that some kind of pay cuts for workers be implemented and settled for a “partial” repeal of prevailing wage. You’d think they would have the common sense, after all that, to leave well enough alone.

But no, Cole and Armstead aren’t finished with West Virginians’ paychecks yet. In the middle of a perfectly nice June (OK, it rained every day), they came out with press releases and interviews accusing loyal, hard-working people at Workforce West Virginia of lying and hiding information. They claim that these regular people — who work a lot more hours for a lot less money than they do — withheld emails about the calculation of prevailing wage their own law required to be done.

And then it turns out: they are full of it. They had all the emails all along. Nothing was held back or hidden from them. It had all been handed over to them months before. You can download every document even mentioning “prevailing wage” right here. Republicans just couldn’t be bothered to read their mail and get their facts right. So these two leading lights in the new GOP firmament hauled off and accused some of the “little people” of deception as a political stunt. Nice.

Cole and Armstead’s plans started with orchestrated press releases from some of the highest offices in West Virginia. They could have privately (not to mention politely) inquired about the information — but getting information was never the point. They wanted a great big chunk of publicity so they went out and used their public positions to trumpet false claims about dedicated public servants, to serve political objectives. Then they wasted some taxpayer dollars on a frivolous subpoena — something no House or Senate had seen fit to do since the ’80s.

On Wednesday of this week, Republicans released a statement from their technical people, claiming that there are differences in the “files” on two flash drives. But after a Cole/Armstead press release had originally suggested Workforce had been dishonest, Sen. Craig Blair began to walk their claims back Wednesday, saying any differences might be simply “an error.” In any case, no evidence of undue influence, or intentional withholding of anything has ever been produced by any of the Republicans attacking the state agency. Furthermore, the more people examine what’s been produced, the better Workforce looks — as in an email, for example, showing that the dedicated public researchers worked hard to isolate themselves to maintain independence and objectivity. For this, they earn scorn from Republicans in the legislature.

It sure seems like Bill Cole and Tim Armstead and Craig Blair and Mitch Carmichael, and some others, owe Workforce West Virginia a big apology. Or, they could triple down with another set of

misleading press releases, staged hearings, and choreographed media appearances. It will be interesting to those following this closely to see which route they take.

But out in the real world, who cares about Cole and Armstead's political show? The subpoenas, the hearings, the feigned outrage from Republicans who wanted repeal of all prevailing wages — that's all just expensive, wasteful, pointless political theater. When can we talk about the real issues and policy changes that can help West Virginia, instead of Republican plans to chisel a few more dollars out of men and women laying asphalt and bricks, or putting in plumbing and electric, or putting a new coat of paint on our classroom walls somewhere?

Let's all call on Cole and Armstead to drop their attack on Workforce WV and prevailing wages, and work on better funding our police forces instead. Let's ask them to drop the effort to cut paychecks down and start building them up, for families who work hard or need a job instead. Let's quit bullying and micromanaging our dedicated teachers and start listening to them instead. End the theater and get to work already — there's plenty to do.

Christopher Regan is vice chairman of the West Virginia Democratic Party and an attorney at Bordas & Bordas, PLLC, in Wheeling. He blogs at homeyesterday.com.