

Thousands protest GOP Legislature at union rally

By David Gutman



CHRIS DORST | Sunday Gazette-Mail photos

Cecil Roberts, president of the United Mine Workers union, prowls the stage as he speaks at a rally of union members protesting against the Republican-led West Virginia

Legislature. Behind him are House Minority Leader Tim Miley (with red tie), House Minority Whip Mike Caputo (in camouflage), Secretary of State Natalie Tennant (gray suit) and Senate Minority Leader Jeff Kessler (jeans and blue pullover). See more photos on Page 8A and a video of the event at wvgazette.com.

Thousands of people came to the West Virginia Capitol building in Charleston on Saturday to hear from the leaders of America's most prominent labor unions at a rally to protest against the agenda of the new Republican majority in the Legislature.

For more than two hours, the crowd listened to labor leaders denounce charter schools, "right-to-work" laws, mine safety rollbacks and the revamping of West Virginia's prevailing-wage law.

"For nearly 60 days, they've conspired with their big owners and their big donors and out-of-state corporations to lower your wages and to take your benefits," said Richard Trumka, president of the national AFL-CIO, gesturing to the Capitol behind him. "Richest nation on earth, at its most rich point in time and we can't figure out how to pay people decent wages."

Workers in union T-shirts created splotches of color across the river-side steps of the Capitol. There was the United Mine Workers in camouflage, United Food and Commercial Workers in yellow, School Service Personnel Association in blue, Service Employees International in purple, United Steelworkers in neon yellow, the American Federation of Government Employees in navy blue, the Laborer's International Union in orange and the Teamsters in blue beanies.

"Brothers and sisters, this is what solidarity looks like in West Virginia," said Cecil Roberts, president of the UMWA. "There's no daylight between any union in this state. We stand together, we fight together."

Roberts, speaking last, paced the stage and practically roared into the microphone, drawing the loudest cheers of the afternoon.

A union official estimated that 6,000 people attended what was officially called the Mountaineer Workers Rising Rally, but that number could not be independently confirmed. Dozens of buses brought in union members both from across West Virginia and from out of state.

Several speakers railed against the American Legislative Exchange Council, a conservative group that writes model legislation for state legislatures. Several bills pushed by Republicans this legislative session are very similar to ALEC legislation.

“Instead of working for workers, they’re just passing along ALEC-proposed legislation,” said Stan Johnson, secretary-treasurer of the United Steelworkers union. “A lot of the legislation doesn’t even look like it belongs in West Virginia.”

Democratic leaders lined up behind the podium, applauding and chanting with the crowd. Among others, there were Senate Minority Leader Jeff Kessler, House Minority Leader Tim Miley, House Minority Whip Mike Caputo (wearing Mine Workers’ camouflage) and Secretary of State Natalie Tennant. Gov. Earl Ray Tomblin did not attend the rally.

No politician spoke, but one did sing. Delegate Mike Pushkin, D-Kanawha, opened the rally on his guitar, singing a number of classic union songs, like “Which Side Are You On?” about a mine war in Harlan County, Kentucky, and Woody Guthrie’s “Union Maid.”

The push to pass a right-to-work law, which will not happen this legislative session, drew particular scorn from speakers, who called it a way to destroy unions and pay lower wages.

Mark Federici, president of the United Food and Commercial Workers Local 400, described two sets of employees, one in Virginia, a right-to-work state, and one in West Virginia.

In Virginia, he said, they get \$2 less per hour, pay more in health benefits and have less-secure pensions.

“Same company, same local union doing its best to negotiate competitive contracts,” Federici said. “One big difference: that no-good right-to-work law.”

Ken Hall, general secretary treasurer of the Teamsters and president of Local 175, attacked what he called “catchy slogans.”

“Has anyone of them come to you and said, ‘Do you think we should have right to work?’ ” he asked, to cries of ‘No!’ from the audience.

“Not all of us can afford to go to a \$25,000-a-plate fundraiser like they do,” he said, in reference to a conservative event held recently at Edgewood Country Club.

Lily Eskelsen Garcia, president of the National Education Association, spoke of “billionaire bullies [who] believe that they can buy our government.

“I am a sixth-grade teacher from a ‘right-to-work-for-less’ state. I will tell you they passed that specifically to cut my pay,” Eskelsen Garcia said. “You have to fight this with every fiber in your being.”

Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, attacked the push for charter schools and alternative- certification programs, such as Teach for America.

“The Legislature is promoting an agenda,” she said, “that is bad for working families and bad for children.”

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