

At union rally, workers not pleased with GOP legislature

By Paul J. Nyden

The thousands who gathered at the West Virginia Capitol for a labor rally on Saturday did not have kind words for the new Republican majorities in the Legislature.

“What the Republican-controlled Legislature is trying to do to working families is immoral. It will move our state backwards,” said Lou Ann Johnson, an associate member of the United Mine Workers union and a former aide to Sen. Jay Rockefeller, D-W. Va. “These legislators ran on a platform of jobs, but what they are doing is sending exactly the wrong signal for the kind of jobs we want to create.”

West Virginia AFL-CIO Treasurer Josh Sword estimated that 6,000 people showed up, including people taking buses from all over the state, but the number could not be independently confirmed. “We are very pleased with the turnout,” Sword said.

Efforts by West Virginia’s new Legislature to pass a “right-to-work” law and to eliminate the state’s prevailing wage were the focus of attention of people who came to the rally. Right-to-work legislation has stalled and a revamp of the prevailing wage, rather than a full repeal, has passed both houses of the Legislature. Republicans argue that both measures will help bring jobs and business to the state.

Johnson, who lives in Jackson County, said she is very familiar with Toyota, which opened its major auto parts plant in Eleanor, and NGK, the spark plug company with a major plant in Sissonville.

“Toyota and NGK wanted a good workforce, good infrastructure and being close to a major highway. Those were the issues important to them,” she said.

Matt Larmer, a retired Wyoming County miner who worked 40 years in the coal industry, said, “It is a shame these people got elected. The first thing they want to do is lay everything on the backs of working people.

“They support the Koch Brothers and a right-to-work law that will take between \$6,000 and \$7,000 a year off of wages.”

Eddie Sutton, a union electrician from Mink Shoals, said, “Our Legislature is not standing up for the working people of West Virginia. Working people need to stand up. People need to stop being apathetic.

“And this is not just a union rally. It is a rally for all working people in the state.”

Heather Whitman, a member of the Service Employees International Union who works at Cabell-Huntington Hospital, said passing legislation like right-to-work laws “hurts workers — all workers — not just union workers.

“I also don’t want to walk into a building built by workers who are not treated properly, skilled workers who lose their prevailing wages,” she said.

Steve Perdue, a sheet metal worker from Clarksburg, said he came down to Charleston on Saturday to

protest a variety of issues before the Legislature.

“They are doing nothing to raise the minimum wage,” he said. “They are destroying training programs and lowering pensions. One new law is hurting coal miners by cutting back on safety laws.

“They are doing away with the middle class and creating a welfare society,” Perdue said. “Then they will do away with welfare benefits.”

Don Morris, who came to Charleston from Preston County, said, “For many years, I worked at a Barbour County mine. Then they shut it down and opened it back up non-union. I left and went to work in Clarksburg, as a member of the IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers] until I retired in 2002.”

Delegate Clif Moore, D-McDowell, was in the crowd.

“Our Legislature is waging a war on workers, on families and on women,” Moore said. “To bring that to the public, we need public displays of dissatisfaction like we have here today.”

Dave Yoak, from Grantsville in Calhoun County, said he is especially worried that prevailing wages for working on government programs could drop.

“I have been a sheet metal worker for 27 years,” he said. “I travel a lot. Sometimes, I go to Morgantown to work. Last year, I drove 32,000 miles to get to work and back home.

“If they cut the prevailing wage, I might as well stay at home and work for the minimum wage.”

Hannah Barnes, a member of the West Virginia Education Association in Morgantown, said she is fed up.

“The Legislature’s charter school bill apparently could allow a school to expel a student if he is gay,” she said. “What we need to do is repair our roads and build new ones. But legislators are focusing on issues like this.”

Judy Hale, president emeritus of the West Virginia chapter of the American Federation of Teachers, said, “Some of the bills that have been introduced are incredible. State legislators are taking them from people like the Koch Brothers and out-of-state corporations.

“We have to get back at the polling places,” Hale said.

Kristy Kay, who lives in Fries, Virginia, and works for Kroger, said, “I came here today to show my support for the fact that right-to-work laws are wrong.”

Nate Bair, has worked for Kroger in Beckley for 35 years.

“My working wage has not kept up with inflation since 1992,” he said. “We need to strive for better benefits for all Americans, not just for the few.”

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