

# Union reps protest prevailing wage repeal legislation

By Paul J. Nyden



CHRIS DORST | Gazette

Union members applaud during a speech at the Culture Center Wednesday as representatives from the West Virginia AFL-CIO, United Mine Workers of America

and the American Federation of Teachers along with Democratic lawmakers speak against pending legislation to enact a right-to-work law and repeal the state's prevailing wage law for construction workers.

Several labor and legislative leaders filled the main hall of the state Culture Center Wednesday afternoon, to discuss what they say are the negative impacts repealing West Virginia's existing prevailing wage law would have on state workers.

"The prevailing wage is good for local businesses and contractors, good for workers and encourages skills and training, the result being cost-effective, quality public projects," Steve White, executive director of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation, said.

Repealing the existing legislation, White said, would hurt local contractors, lead to wage cuts and fewer job-training opportunities and result in "more accidents on the job — all that for no savings of taxpayer funds."

Conrad Lucas, chairman of the West Virginia Republican Party, disagreed.

"Citizens overpay for the construction of our schools, roads and public buildings by more than \$100 million each year in our state," Lucas said in a statement. "We owe it to them and our children's future to get the most we can out of every dollar we spend. That starts with making sure the state gets a good deal when it pays to build anything.

"Prevailing Wage rates are artificially high, which means fewer jobs created and fewer buildings for the same tax dollars," Lucas said.

Prevailing wage legislation, White said, "prevents workers from other states coming here to work for lower wages.

"West Virginia builds schools cheaper than Virginia and North Carolina, which have no prevailing wage laws," he said.

Those laws, White added, also lead to higher job productivity, better training programs and reduced drug abuse.

Repealing the prevailing wage law, he added, would cost West Virginia "\$55 million to \$84 million a year in lost wages, lost income taxes and lost sales taxes."

Senate Minority Leader Jeff Kessler, D-Marshall, told the gathering at the Culture Center, “These are the times that try men’s souls. A radical and wrong agenda is being proposed.

“You need to look these new legislators in the eye,” he said. “Some of the new legislators are voting like lemmings. You need to hold them accountable.”

Sen. Ronald E. Miller, D-Greenbrier, said, “I am a small farmer from Greenbrier County. I usually don’t get into these fights.”

Miller pointed to a crane outside the Culture Center. “Look at the work being done on the roof of the Capitol. It is being done by a West Virginia contractor, with West Virginia workers,” he said.

“I am proud to stand with you. I am proud of the people who built the schools, the roads and the bridges,” Miller said. “I have always supported ‘Buy Local’ in agriculture. Let’s support ‘Work Local’ too.”

Sen. Bill Laird, D-Fayette, said, “This is a true travesty in the making. But you have people who are absolutely going to stand up with workers in West Virginia.

Sen. John Unger, D-Berkeley, said, “At no time since I have been here have I seen such a change, — a change against working people. I’ve been here for 17 years.”

Secretary of State Natalie Tenant said decent wages are critical for business owners too. “Their customers come from workers who make good wages and put their wages back into the economy,” she said.

Kenny Perdue, president of the West Virginia AFL-CIO, also criticized proposed right-to-work laws, which would allow workers in union-represented workplaces to refuse to pay monthly union dues.

“It’s simple. This is an attempt to take away the voice of workers in the workplace,” Perdue said.

“According to data from the [federal] Bureau of Labor Statistics,” Perdue said, “the rate of workplace deaths is 54.4 percent higher in states with right-to-work laws, while the average salary is \$5,971 lower in right-to-work than in free bargaining states.”

White also pointed to a study issued last month by Dr. Michael P. Kelsay from the University of Missouri in Kansas City, entitled, “The Adverse Economic Impact from Repeal of the Prevailing Wage Law in West Virginia.”

In West Virginia, Kelsay’s study concluded, repeal of the prevailing wage law would:

| Cost residents and their families in West Virginia between \$51.3 million and \$77.3 million a year in lost wages.

| Cost the state between \$1.4 million and \$2.2 million a year in lost sales taxes.

| Cost the state between \$3.1 million and \$4.6 million in lost income tax revenues.

| Cost a total economic loss between \$44.8 million and \$84.1 million annually.

Eliminating the prevailing wage, Kelsay concluded, would also cut back on workers’ health care benefits, pension benefits, workplace safety and the quality of training and apprenticeship programs.

Lucas criticized prevailing wage laws for focusing on one industry.

“It doesn’t make sense that construction work is the only field that is held under the government’s thumb and forced to pay wages in excess of the market,” he said. “We need the ability for the government to shop for the best deal. When we overspend for the same services, it means we get less than we deserve as taxpayers.”

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