

 URL: <http://www.wvgazette.com/article/20150915/GZ04/150919707>

## Christopher J. Regan: Bill Cole's 'Chamber' agenda is lower wages for W.Va.

By Christopher J. Regan

With summer behind us, the “distraction” stories, like Kim Davis in Kentucky, lost emails on servers, and Donald Trump on every screen, can finally take a backseat to the issues that really make a difference in people’s lives. The issue that should stand out the most is raising the wages working families earn. Two more issues well worth talking about would be the condition of our roads and the compensation of our teachers.

With legislative “interims” this week, you would think that our legislature would be locked in on the need to raise wages and incomes for working families in West Virginia. You would think they would be exploring policies to encourage work, like the earned income tax credit, or making sure rich executives don’t evade their fair share of taxes. You would be wrong, though.

In reality, the new Republican majority has shown interest only in a series of policies that lower wages, to benefit well-to-do donors who can then increase profits at the expense of their employees. Republicans are also hinting that they will consider reducing taxes on wealthy corporations, leaving ordinary people holding the bag. And the roads and schoolteachers? Forget it.

We seem to have spent most of the summer in West Virginia politics talking about the Republican attack on our construction workers’ prevailing wages. Enough’s been said about that, except to say that blue-collar wages being “too high” hardly seems to be any part of what ails West Virginia. Hard-working men and women deserve a raise, not the pay cut the GOP made their mission last session and all summer long.

But last week, Senate Judiciary Chairman Charlie Trump, R-Morgan, actually began entertaining a repeal of the minimum wage in West Virginia. West Virginia’s current minimum wage is \$8 per hour, a small bump over the \$7.25 federal minimum. How cruel does a political party have to be to look at that extra 75 cents an hour and say “let’s take it away and see how they do then?”

But that’s not all. The misnamed “right to work” proposal that is also on the agenda of Bill Cole, R-Mercer, and Mitch Carmichael, R-Frontier, for next year actually targets union members’ contract wages. Republicans say this law prevents people from being “forced to join a union,” but no American can be forced to join a union since Supreme Court decisions at least as far back as 1963. In reality, the misnamed law has lowered wages, across the board, in virtually every place it has been tried.

It’s not hard to see where this is coming from when you look more closely. The out-of-state corporate groups, like ALEC, have done their work on the mind of the modern Republican. Right-wing politicians have lost any connection to working people and now simply take their marching orders from billionaires like the Koch brothers. To those rich backers, nothing is sacred, not even the modest minimum wage. Money says “jump!” and the likes of Jeb Bush, Bill Cole, or J.B. McCuskey say “how high?”

Think I’m exaggerating? Why, Bill Cole even went to the Greenbrier to explicitly promise the Chamber of Commerce that businesses, not families or workers, would dictate his agenda — he said, and I quote: “[w]hat got advanced was virtually a page out of the playbook of the Chamber. It was exactly the Chamber’s agenda, as it should be.” He can’t make it any plainer where he gets his bread buttered, and where he gets

his marching orders.

So if you are thinking about who you'd like to be your next Governor, ask yourself these three questions: Does the West Virginia Chamber, that just got done giving Dick Cheney a standing ovation, represent you? If it doesn't, then neither should Bill Cole. Do you think the Chamber will share its success with you? If it won't, then neither will Bill Cole. Were you even invited to the Greenbrier when Bill Cole got his orders from the Chamber? If you weren't, then why would you trust Bill Cole?

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