

Debate on prevailing wage repeal starts

By Phil Kabler

House of Delegates members Friday opened debate on a bill to repeal the state's Prevailing Wage Act (HB 4005), launching what one labor leader described as the second phase of a two-pronged legislative attack on workers.

"We're getting a double-barrel attack, but there's a number of businessmen who feel like they're being attacked as well," Steve White, director of the Affiliated Trades Construction Foundation, said after an early-morning public hearing on the bill.

For the third straight day, union members made their presence known at the Capitol, as they filled House chambers and galleries for the Government Organization Committee hearing.

Union members also filled the second floor of the main Capitol Wednesday for the State of the State address, and turned out in large numbers Thursday and Friday as the Senate Judiciary Committee deliberated a right-to-work bill that would allow workers in union shops to opt out of paying union dues (SB 1).

On Friday, a large majority of speakers — primarily union representatives and building contractors — spoke against repealing prevailing wage.

Thomas Samples, an electrician training director from Putnam County, made note of the disparity.

"Where are all the people who support this, other than the Americans for Prosperity, who seem to think taxpayers are different from construction workers?" he said.

Jason Huffman, state director for Americans for Prosperity, the Arlington, Virginia-based conservative political advocacy group founded by the Koch brothers, was one of the few speakers Friday advocating for repeal of prevailing wage.

Huffman called prevailing wage an "outdated and expensive mandate," adding, "Construction shouldn't cost more simply because taxpayers are footing the bill."

John Strickland, president of Maynard C. Smith Construction in Charleston, was one of several contractors Friday who disputed the theory that prevailing wage adds to costs of construction projects.

He said that for his company, prevailing wage assures availability of workers who've completed certified apprenticeship training programs, OSHA safety training, and who comply with drug-free workplace mandates.

"These three things make us very competitive. They're a productive workforce," Strickland said. "I would hate to lose that edge we have with prevailing wage."

Afterward, committee Chairman Gary Howell, R-Mineral, said the committee would not be swayed by the disparity between supporters and opponents of the bill Friday.

"One of the groups that's opposed to it is organized labor, and they are organized," he said.

Howell said it will be the middle of next week at the earliest before the committee takes up the bill — which consists of a single sentence declaring that the current law is repealed.

This marks the second straight year that the Legislature has taken up legislation to repeal prevailing wage.

Last year, legislators compromised, and passed a bill that instead made major changes in the way the prevailing wage rates are calculated.

That included moving rate-setting authority from the state Division of Labor to WorkForce West Virginia, which worked with business and economic researchers at Marshall and West Virginia University to come up with a more accurate methodology to measure wages being paid to construction workers in seven regions of the state.

However, legislative leaders were highly critical of the process, which ultimately did not dramatically cut wage rates for state-funded construction projects of \$500,000 or more.

Leaders began discussing plans to repeal prevailing wage even before the new wage rates went into effect Oct. 1.

White said he doesn't understand the rush to repeal prevailing wage, since there hasn't been enough time to determine the accuracy or effectiveness of the new wage rates.

WorkForce West Virginia surveyed more than 3,700 building contractors to determine wage rates, significantly more than the Division of Labor or federal Bureau of Labor Statistics uses to calculate rates.

“Let's get that data out and talk about it,” White said.

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