

West Virginia AFL-CIO wants to educate public about damaging laws

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CHARLESTON – As the 2016 regular legislative session winds down to its final hours, the leadership of the West Virginia AFL-CIO is preparing an aggressive campaign to educate West Virginians across the state about the damaging laws pursued by the Republican leadership that do nothing to improve the lives of working families, and in fact stand to hurt them.

“From the very start of the 2016 legislative session, the Republican leadership’s focus has been on lowering wages for workers and weakening the unions that represent them, as evidenced by Senate Bill 1, so-called ‘Right to Work,’” WV AFL-CIO President Kenny Perdue said.

“Much of the first half of the legislative session was consumed by divisiveness and confusion surrounding Right to Work and elimination of the state Prevailing Wage, then the bulk of the remainder of the session was spent on other legislation that does absolutely nothing to create jobs or help working families.”

WV AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer Josh Sword noted that while legislators spent countless hours debating polarizing social-issue legislation, the leadership failed to propose a solution to the long-term debt facing the West Virginia Public Employee Insurance Agency that affects more than 230,000 public workers and retirees, as well as all West Virginia taxpayers.

“While members from the minority party repeatedly attempted to force the Legislature to act on PEIA, the Republican leadership kept assuring them, and members of the public, that they had a fix for the critical problem,” Sword said. “Clearly, that was not the case.

“In these final days, we are witnessing consideration of a state budget that leaves PEIA woefully underfunded, forcing premium increases and long-term massive debt. We have to assume that the plan all along was to provide only a Band-Aid solution while saddling state employees who haven’t had a raise in years and retirees who’ve never had an increase in their pensions with what amounts to pay cuts.”

In addition, the Senate passed a budget that assumes tobacco tax and road funding revenue which hinge on bills the House of Delegates had already rejected, sending to the House a budget that cannot be sustained.

“Essentially, the Senate passed a budget based on pure fantasy, which at this late stage is irresponsible,” Perdue said.

“Since the Legislature has not been able to pass any laws that will generate new revenue, it seems inevitable that the leadership will follow through on a Republican Party official’s previously stated goal of laying off 15,000 public employees.”

During the final week of the session a move by the Senate Republican leadership exemplified the

mean-spirited nature of their overall legislative agenda.

“For no apparent reason other than to retaliate against our outspoken opposition to legislation that hurts West Virginia workers, the leadership took steps to deny Elaine Harris of the Communication Workers and myself re-appointment to boards we have served on for over 15 years — having been appointed by Republican Governor Underwood to speak on behalf of labor,” Perdue said. “That spoke volumes about this Republican leadership’s disdain for working people.”

Harris serves on the PEIA Finance Board, while Perdue serves on Workforce Development Board. The Senate Confirmation Committee voted to deny their reappointment earlier this week at the direction of Senate leadership. Following protest by Democrat senators, the appointments were confirmed today.

Earlier in the session, the Republican leadership also shepherded through the Senate legislation that would have reduced the size of the PEIA Finance Board and removed the requirement in law that at least two members represent labor.

“But those petty actions aside, what is truly troubling is the legislation that was promoted as being economic development bills, but are in fact measures that do nothing but lower wages,” Perdue said.

“Rather than considering the facts presented about Right to Work and the Prevailing Wage, the Republican leadership chose to act on behalf of out-of-state big-money special interest groups.

“All Democrat members, as well as a few House Republicans, saw through the misleading, often outright false, rhetoric that has been aggressively spread during the contentious debates over those bills, and understood that they will do nothing to create jobs. Those members who voted ‘no’ sent the clear message to West Virginia residents that their first priority is helping working families succeed, rather than pursuing legislation that serves out-of-state corporate interests.”

As the 2016 election season gets underway, Perdue and Sword said the West Virginia AFL-CIO will direct its efforts toward informing West Virginia voters of the facts behind such legislation and how their legislative representatives voted on those measures.

“In truth, there is one positive outcome as a result of this legislative session: Our members are angry and motivated,” Perdue said.

“We intend to help the more than 140,000 working men and women we represent channel that anger into supporting candidates for public office who will pursue initiatives to improve West Virginia’s economy and help working families.”