

A lack of ideas

In these difficult days, our Republican Legislature is passing bills that don't amount to a hill of beans

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Pardon us while we scratch our heads.

At a time when everyone in this state needs to be focused with laser-like precision on how to shore up our economy before the whole house falls down, our Republican-led Legislature is doing everything in its power to create conditions where it would be A-OK to reduce wages for working men and women — all for the sake of an “agenda” written by the hand of political dogma.

Every economist knows that when you put money into the pockets of low- and moderate-income workers, those dollars get spent and economies heal. You know that, your neighbor knows that and every last legislator in Charleston knows that. But evidently, some of those folks who represent us just don't have time for facts. They are too consumed with the concept of trickle-down economics, where if you put great gobs of money into the hands of corporate kings, some of that coin will rain down on all the peasants.

Feeling rich yet? Or just soaked?

Here in the southern reaches of West Virginia we're getting hit — almost daily, it seems — with layoff notices left and right. At the coal mine. In a school district. At the only Wal-Mart in the county. And, yet, what is our Legislature up to?

First there was right-to-work legislation — aka the Workplace Freedom bill — that would prohibit companies from requiring employees to join a union. As we've said previously, that seems fair on the face of it, but just know that unions would be obliged to represent all workers in a union shop whether or not those employees belonged to the union. It doesn't take an Einstein to see the further deterioration of union membership, influence, worker pay and benefits, to say nothing of workplace safety.

So a right-to-work law is necessary for our economy to grow? Taking dollars out of workers' pockets? To make our state more attractive for qualified workers and businesses that want to hire them? If you answer “yes,” then please tell us how on God's green Earth the state ever attracted Procter and Gamble to build its \$500 million manufacturing hub in the Eastern Panhandle — before Workplace Freedom came to Charleston. While you're trying to spin that, tell us how the state attracted Macy's to build a distribution center in Berkeley County in 2012.

Now comes the proposed repeal of the 81-year-old Prevailing Wage Act.

In our dear state, prevailing hourly rate of wages are paid to workers employed by or on behalf of any public authority engaged in the construction of a public improvement. Yes, it is a good — but not extravagant — hourly rate. No worker is going to get rich off of this, but it does help assure that a project will attract skilled and experienced workers who will deliver quality construction — in the best interests of the public. It will help put meat, potatoes and veggies on the dinner table and make certain a mortgage — or the rent — gets paid. There will be dollars to buy a car, see a movie, spend a little more at Christmas. Someone in the family gets to go to college. It puts money in circulation — like putting gas in an economic engine.

As is the case with Workplace Freedom, there are no statistics to bolster the contention that repealing the Prevailing Wage Act will be good for the state. In fact, some unions are suggesting it will cost the state \$80 million in lost wages and tax revenue.

Lost revenue? When the state already faces a \$354 million doughnut hole?

We're not asking lawmakers to take the union's word for it, but you'd think they'd at least want to study what effect a repeal could have — something along the lines of a jobs impact study. Ain't happening, say proponents of the repeal. (You may want to read Pam Pritt's 1A story today for details.)

Must be nice to be a Republican legislator and so certain of the agenda.

We, on the other hand, have serious doubts about the majority party's competency to generate ideas that will lead our state out of these very difficult days.