

# Senate committee advances right to work on party-line vote

By David Gutman

A bill to make West Virginia a “right-to-work” state passed the Senate Judiciary Committee on a strict party line vote Friday, clearing the way for the full Senate to consider the legislation next week.

The nine Republicans on the committee voted for the right to work legislation, while the eight Democrats voted no.

The resignation of Sen. Daniel Hall last week had left the committee with only 16 members, eight from each party. But Sen. Greg Boso, R-Nicholas, was appointed to the committee on Wednesday, shortly after the Legislature convened, giving the Republicans the necessary majority.

The legislation would free workers in unionized workplaces from having to pay union fees, even though they would still benefit from union representation and union-negotiated contracts. Workers in unionized workplaces do not currently have to join the union, but they must pay fees for the union’s work in negotiating contracts and benefits.

Fewer than 10 percent of West Virginia workers in unionized workplaces choose this option, according to the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics.

About 11.6 percent of West Virginia workers were represented by unions at their workplace in 2014, while 10.6 percent — 76,000 workers — are actual union members.

Those numbers are down significantly since 2013.

In 2013, 93,000 West Virginia workers were represented by unions, while in 2014, the number fell to 80,000, according to the BLS.

For the second day in a row, the often sleepy committee room was packed to capacity, with an overflow of union members, upset at the legislation, filling the hallway.

Republicans argued that the bill was both a matter of fairness for workers and that it would make West Virginia more attractive to potential businesses.

“If this bill, providing workers the freedom to join a union or not join a union, would create one job, it’s worth it,” said Senate Majority Leader Mitch Carmichael, R-Jackson.

The committee heard from state Commerce Secretary Keith Burdette, who said right-to-work was not an issue in recruiting businesses.

“We’ve never been recruiting a business who said ‘no’ because of right to work,” said Burdette, a Democrat. “If you asked me for a list of companies that will not look at a state that is not right-to-work, I can’t produce that list.”

Carmichael said that a right-to-work law would be another tool that Burdette could use to recruit

businesses to the state.

But Burdette said it was insignificant compared to the state's true challenges: an undereducated workforce and the lack of flat land for manufacturing facilities.

Sen. Mike Romano, D-Harrison, agreed.

"Not one person has stood up and said, 'here's a company that's coming to West Virginia with 500 jobs if we pass right to work, because it's a fallacy,'" Romano said. "Its benefits are murky, its detriments are immutable."

Democrats argued that the bill, in weakening unions, would lower wages and workplace safety.

"Lower wages and a loss of union membership are what will very likely happen," said Sen. Herb Snyder, D-Jefferson. "It happened in other states, it'll happen here."

But Carmichael said the bill would not prevent anybody from joining a union or prevent them from paying union dues, it just gives them the option to opt out. "This is a freedom-enhancing bill," Carmichael said.

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