
Ken Hall: Know the truth about right-to-work (Gazette)

By Ken Hall

Today at the State Capitol in Charleston I will join scores of Teamsters, union members and everyday West Virginians to let lawmakers know that approving so-called right-to-work is no way to improve the state's economic woes.

Make no mistake, West Virginia's economy is extremely fragile and struggling. Our state is heavily dependent on coal production and with demand and pricings falling — things outside our control — we are in for a continued rough ride. State officials are projecting that nearly 80 percent of this year's budget deficit is from lost coal-tax revenue. What are our legislators doing about it?

The first item on their political agenda is to pass RTW legislation that they purport will bring the Mountain State up from the bottom rung of the ladder on population growth, job creation, wage levels and education attainment to the top. But as the old saying goes, if it sounds too good to be true, then it probably is.

Right-to-work won't create jobs. It is only an attack on unions, plain and simple, and union jobs that provide fair wages and benefits to workers. West Virginians deserve to hear the truth and they aren't getting it from our Senate or House leadership and certainly not from the Chamber of Commerce.

RTW does NOT create jobs or help the economy. Oklahoma passed RTW in 2001 with the promise of large increases in the number of new companies and jobs coming into the state. A 2015 study of what happened in Oklahoma after passing RTW concluded there were no significant effects on job growth or wages.

A spokesman for the national right-to-work committee admitted in an interview during Wisconsin's RTW debate that "we're not purporting to prove that right-to-work produces superior economic performance."

RTW does NOT increase wages. The most rigorous academic studies show the wages are \$1,500 lower for similar employees in RTW states compared to non-RTW states.

RTW does NOT attract business. Area Development, a site selection magazine that regularly surveys manufacturers on important factors for location decisions, has never had RTW legislation in their top 10. The top two factors in the most recent survey were availability of skilled labor and access to a major highway.

Chamber of Commerce Director Steve Roberts is deceiving West Virginians about the potential benefits of RTW when he made the following statements that no RTW states are in the bottom five of the highest unemployment rates; that Oklahoma, after passing RTW, grew jobs; and that RTW has benefited the three states where it recently passed.

The Truth:

n Five of the eight states with unemployment rates 6 percent or higher are RTW states.

n In the 10 years after RTW passed in Oklahoma, manufacturing fell by one-third as did the total number of new jobs coming into the state.

n And in Wisconsin, the most recent state to pass RTW, ask the 1,000 workers at Oscar Mayer about whether the new law is good for jobs. They found out in November 2015 that their jobs are gone, joining the nearly 8,400 workers that had already been affected by mass layoffs — a 50 percent increase in the 2014 number.

RTW is funded by out-of-state business interests with a political agenda. RTW advocates have been successful in co-opting Republican-controlled statehouses to pass RTW legislation. If RTW actually did what its proponents claimed, it would have much more bipartisan support and could stand up on its policy merits.

Like all West Virginians, I am hopeful the coal industry will turn itself around and create new jobs. But don't be distracted from what we really need — forward-thinking policies to address the fundamental problems of our state's economy, which requires serious discussion on investments in early childhood education, job skills training and our state's failing infrastructure.

RTW shouldn't be part of any plan to turn the state's economy around.

Ken Hall is president of Teamsters Local 175 and Teamsters general secretary-treasurer.