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# Labor packs Ohio Statehouse, protests union limits

By JULIE CARR SMYTH - Feb 16, 2011 11:22 AM ET  
 By The Associated Press

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COLUMBUS, Ohio (AP) — Hundreds of union protesters again packed the Statehouse in protest on Tuesday as government officials from around the state lined up in support of a bill that would wipe out Ohio's nearly 30-year-old collective bargaining law and make other union changes.

A crowd of firefighters, police officers and other public employees overflowed the hearing room, packing cat walks and filling the Statehouse Atrium and Rotunda to standing-room-only capacity for much of the afternoon. It was the second week that hearings on the bill drew such crowds.

The Senate bill, sponsored by Republican state Sen. Shannon Jones, would eliminate collective bargaining rights and salary schedules for public employees across the state. GOP Gov. John Kasich has expressed his support for the bill in concept, but he has also signaled he may bring forth his own plan that could go even further — including banning public employee strikes.

During hours of testimony piped by large speakers throughout the Statehouse, John Lazarus, superintendent of the Warren County Educational Services Center, was among those advocating the changes. He told senators that citizens have become savvy and understand how wage and salary packages for teacher unions are affecting district budgets.

He told the Senate Insurance, Commerce & Labor Committee some relief from collective bargaining and binding arbitration could allow school districts to restore public confidence amid increasing levy rejections.

"The fact is public perception has largely turned against school districts forced to ask for levies every three to five years," he said, emphasizing union parameters need to change to turn things around.

A parade of local government officials delivered a similar message, advocating added flexibility in negotiating contracts with their unions.

Protester Chris Weaver, a Youngstown firefighter, said the law has meant better working conditions for firefighters. He said collective bargaining has resulted in pay freezes and cuts throughout the state.

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"We're not allowed to strike like other city workers, so when you take away collective bargaining we have no rights at all," he said. "Our employer has the final say."

At a union-sponsored press conference on the bill earlier Tuesday, Republican city worker Leo Geiger accused Kasich and other Republicans of attacking collective bargaining for political purposes.

"It does nothing to help the budget woes because it's political payback for those who did not support them in the election," he said.

Kasich showed no signs of bowing to pressure.

Asked whether the number of people showing up to committee hearings on collective bargaining would have any influence on him, he said, "All we're doing in this business is to make sure that cities can manage their costs so taxpayers don't get caught holding the bag, driving businesses out of their communities and jobs. Just think about the city of Brooklyn, which may drive American Greeting out because they were not smart, to restore some balance between management and labor. I mean this is common sense."

He said Ohio's 1983 law passed on an extreme partisan vote and needs reform.

Jean Fightmaster, a former state investigator who's now retired, told reporters she remembers life before and after the collective bargaining law first passed. She said she worried about going back to the late 1970s when women were sometimes passed over for jobs in favor of men.

"We don't want to go back to the dark days of when people were mistreated," she said. "We don't want the workers of the state of Ohio to look like Gov. Kasich's Cabinet, all white and all male."

Kasich for a time had an all-white Cabinet. He has since appointed one agency director who is black. There are several women in his Cabinet.

Associated Press Writer Ann Sanner contributed to this report.

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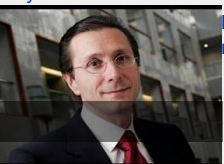


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