



FLORIDA AFL-CIO UNITED LABOR LOBBY



LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

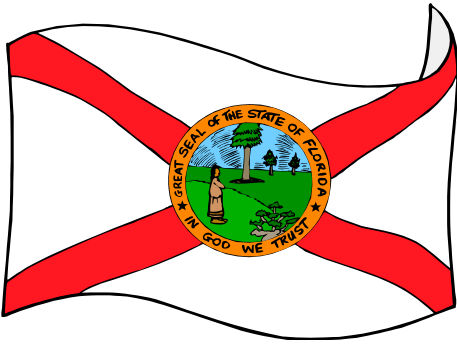
2007 FLORIDA LEGISLATURE

March 16, 2007

Issue 2

Governor Charlie Crist's First State of the State Address: There's a New Sheriff in Town Part II

On March 6th, Governor Charlie Crist fulfilled his first obligation of the 2007 Legislative Session with his annual address about the state of Florida. As one Democratic legislator said in the press following the speech said "That was one of the greatest speeches I've heard from a Democratic governor." This tongue planted firmly in cheek comment wasn't too far off the mark. Instead of the usual litany extolling the benefits of a far-right ideology, truth be damned, Governor Crist instead used this opportunity to highlight what he claims and we hope will be his approach to governing; an approach that acknowledges the real challenges facing our state and seeks to tackle them in a spirit of cooperation with all voices, regardless of their political or ideological affiliation. In this second installment of our analysis of his speech, we examine the positions he has taken on some of the issues and how they present opportunities for Florida's labor movement to work in partnership with the Governor's office for the first time in eight years. In this portion of our report we look at Governor Crist's take on social services, environmental protection and economic development.



"We must raise the profile of all children's issues, from education to health. As stewards of this state, our greatest obligation is to our children. But often it is their voice that goes unheard, or overlooked. Our children need a voice. They need to be at the table because soon—it will be their table. That is why I will support the creation of a "Children's Cabinet" to coordinate state services and oversee child welfare issues."

Governor Crist's determination to help our kids has gone well beyond the creation of this Children's Cabinet. Probably the best example of this can be found in his approach to the collapse of Florida's KidCare program. Like Medicaid, Florida KidCare is a program which operates as a partnership between the federal government and the state. The program is designed to ensure that all children have access to basic health care. Over the past several years, the program has been decimated. Budgets have been cut, eligibility requirements have been tightened to eliminate thousands of children from the program and complex bureaucratic hurdles have been established to discourage the people who desperately need the program from enrolling. Florida is one of only a handful of states where the number of children without insurance is growing. Over the past year, child and health care advocates worked with policy experts to develop a comprehensive policy to save KidCare and get our needy kids basic health care coverage. These changes include making the children of public employees and immigrants eligible for the program, expand pre-natal eligibility for pregnant women, eliminate the burdensome enrollment process and finally begin promoting the program around the state. Under the previous administration these ideas would have been ruled dead on arrival. Governor Crist embraced these changes and, thanks to his support, there is now a bipartisan effort to pass this landmark reform in both chambers.

"And in caring about our children, we must think of the Florida they will inherit. Florida's beauty is the reason why so many of us are here. We have an obligation to protect the land, the water, and the air for generations to come. To that end I am proposing that we continue the state's commitment to restoring America's Everglades by appropriating 100 million dollars for that purpose, as well as 40 million to clean up the St. Lucie and Caloosahatchee rivers and 50 million for Lake Okechobee."

Florida politicians of all stripes have long pledged to restore the Florida Everglades but the support has often stopped. Painfully little progress was made under Governor Bush although federal inaction was also to blame. Crist's pledge to appropriate real dollars to these three critical environmental problems marks what may be a new commitment to Florida's fragile environment and the billions of dollars it generates through tourism.

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“It is worth noting that the dramatic rise in our insurance premiums did not occur without cause. It occurred in large part because of an equally dramatic rise in the number and intensity of hurricanes that battered our state in recent years. This simple fact reflects a challenge that we ignore at our own peril. I am persuaded that global climate change is one of the most important issues that we will face this century.”

Whoa! Did I catch that right? Did a Florida Governor actually acknowledge global warming as a major problem? These 75 words uttered in the hallowed halls of the Florida House represent a major milestone. Lip service has often been paid to the idea that we need to investigate global warming but our past Governor never acknowledged this as a real problem. But Governor Crist did not stop there.

“With almost 1,200 miles of coastline and the majority of our citizens living near that coastline, Florida is more vulnerable to rising ocean levels and violent weather patterns than any other state. Yet, we have done little to understand and address the root causes of this problem, or frankly, even acknowledge that the problem exists. No longer. Following this legislative session, I will bring together the brightest minds to begin working on a plan for Florida to explore groundbreaking technologies and strategies that will place our state at the forefront of a growing worldwide movement to reduce greenhouse gases. Florida will provide not only the policy and technological advances, but the moral leadership, to allow us to overcome this monumental challenge.”

Yes! Yes! Yes! This is the issue, the future of our state and the devastating costs of inaction on our economy. But he wasn't done there.

“But during this session, we can take the first bold steps in moving toward alternative fuels and other alternative sources of energy. I have proposed almost 70 million dollars in my budget to foster the development and use of alternative energy sources and fuels in our state, including ethanol and biodiesel fuels for our cars and solar power for our homes. There is no reason why, as Commissioner Bronson has pointed out, that the Sunshine state cannot be the national leader in the production of alternative energy. With these measured steps, we can begin to achieve three important goals: addressing global climate change, promoting Florida agriculture, and weaning our country from reliance on foreign oil. “

New energy is the future. Just as oil, steel and heavy machinery production catapulted the United States to the most powerful economy in the world, so will alternative energy technology for the first nation to develop and capture the market. Numerous studies have predicted that a major energy diversification program, like the Apollo Energy program outlined by John Kerry in 2004, will create hundreds of thousands of good paying high skill jobs. The labor movement is in a unique position to fill those jobs. The same is true in Florida. Just like NASA created thousands of union jobs with Project Apollo and the Space Shuttle, so can alternative energy production and distribution in the future. Crist mentioned agriculture, but the real beneficiaries will be Florida's workers. This is about protecting the environment and global warming, but it is also about good economic development and it appears as if our new Governor gets it.

“We can improve schools, we can lower taxes and insurance premiums, and we can protect our environment, but if we fail to afford our most vulnerable citizens basic safety and security, we will not have discharged our duty to the people who elected us. That is why I have proposed the Anti-Murder Act. Let us send a clear message to violent criminals if they violate probation, they are going back to jail where they can do no further harm to our people and our children. “

The not so creatively named “Anti-Murder Act” was the first legislation to land on the Governor's desk. This campaign promised policy reminds us of Crist's “Chain gang Charlie” days and marks a return to his get-tough-on-crime roots. The research is spotty on the impact this will have on the system. The number of re-offenders is actually small but high-profile cases make the problem seem far worse. The Governor signed the bill into law on March 12, 2007.

Next Week in our third and final look at the State of the State address we look at more talk of jobs creation the spirit of bi-partisanship.



Messages From the Front Lines

News from the Trenches of the Florida Legislature

Restrictions on Citizen's Ballot Initiative Petitions - OPPOSE

SB 900 by Posey

HB 7009 by Cannon

The big business cartel is back this session trying to gut the people's right to change their Constitution through ballot initiatives. The multiple front, full court press of the past few years has slowed somewhat, largely because most legislators know that after the passage of the 60% vote amendment last year, Florida has the hardest Constitution in the country to amend. There are still some efforts out there to restrict the process even further. Once again, they are trying to change the signature gathering process so that well-funded special interest groups like the Florida Chamber of Commerce will still be able to put issues on the ballot, but grass roots community groups like ACORN will not. This legislation bans accountability measures for paid petition gatherers, imposes a 30-day limit for volunteers to turn in signatures and creates a new signature revocation process that is particularly troubling. Under this bill, groups opposed to an issue headed for the ballot will be able to get a list of names and addresses of people who signed petitions and then go behind the signature gatherers and encourage them to revoke their signatures. The House bill also gives store owners new power to restrict the activities of signature gatherers with whom they disagree. **SB 900 passed the Senate Ethics on March 8th with a 6-3 partisan vote. Senators Alexander, Atwater, Jones, Oelrich, Posey and Constantine voted for the bill. Senators Margolis, Rich and Justice voted in no. HB 7009 passed the House Economic Expansion & Infrastructure Council with only Representatives Bucher, Cusack and Reed voting in opposition.** SB 900 will next be heard in the Senate Judiciary Committee and HB 7009 in the House Budget and Policy Council.

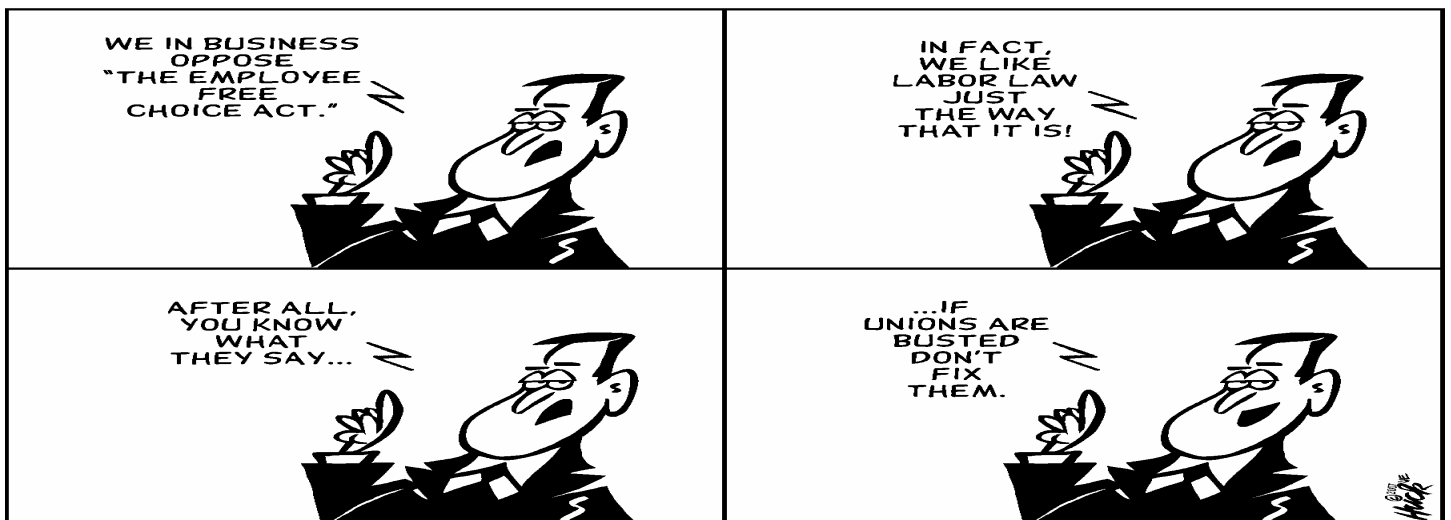
Making Discrimination Easier – OPPOSE

SB 736 by Oelrich

HB 233 by Brown, Traviesa

Part of the attack on the people's right to amend the constitution is a series of bills designed to expand the ability for shopping center owners to kick out petition gatherers supporting issues they don't agree with (like the minimum wage) while allowing people supporting issues they like (like repealing the minimum wage) to remain – a violation of the spirit of the 1st Amendment and the letter of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. There are a handful of bills that seek to accomplish this, but by far the most egregious are these two beauties. These bills give store owners the right to kick anyone off of their property for any reason whatsoever! Our nation and our state have been down this slippery slope before with dreadful consequences. Remember when African Americans were banned from commercial premises, like lunch counters in downtown Tallahassee, simply because of their race. The argument at the time was "this is my private property; I can choose who I let in" or "I am protecting my business from the presence of individuals whom I think hurt my business." These arguments are very similar to the ones being used in support of this legislation. This could also create new barriers to union organizers and could create lengthy court battles over this state law that seems to violate the federal National Labor Relations Act. **HB 233 was heard on March 14th in the House Committee on Courts. The bill was temporarily postponed when it became apparent that the votes were not there for passage, but not before Rep. Don Brown, one of the most vehement anti-labor voices in the House, gave an impassioned speech calling for a return to the polices that could only be described as pre-civil rights era.** We will remain vigilant to ensure that this misguided measure is not resurrected.

Messages continued on back page



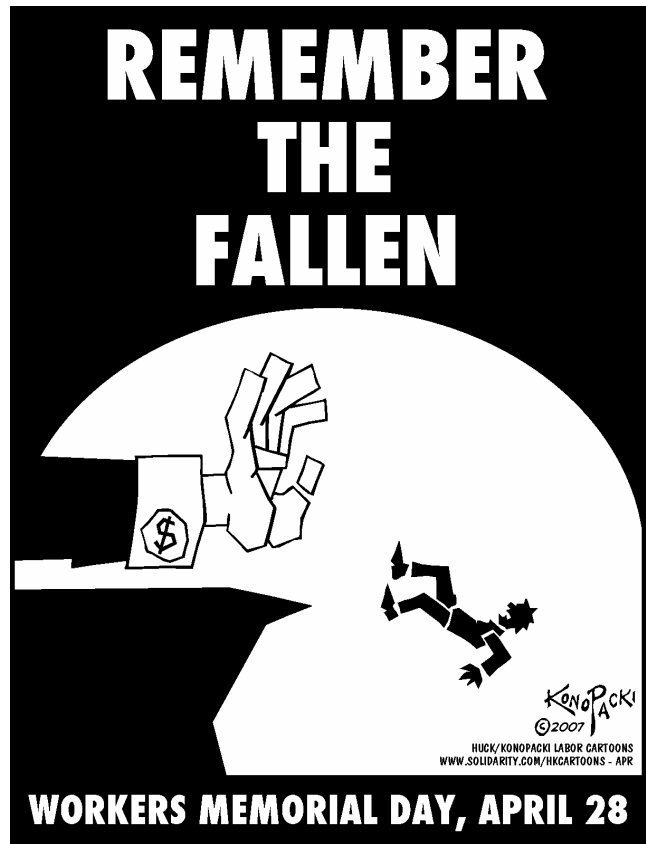
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Railroad Trespass - OPPOSE

SB 320 by King

HB 9 by Mahon, Kravitz, Richardson

The past two weeks have seen a plethora of bills all trying to expand the powers of big business to kick people off of their property or not be held liable for accidents on their property. Unions representing railroad workers have expressed many serious misgivings about this legislation. First, the bill does not directly address who is permitted on Posted or Not Posted railroad property, leaving an open door to possible harassment of union members, especially during organizing drives. Second, the bill does not specify minimum requirements for the number of railroad police or the geographic area that individual officers are responsible for monitoring. Third, this legislation does not do anything to increase funding for Operation Lifesaver, an educational program voluntarily funded by the railroads designed to teach children about the hazards surrounding rail lines. Finally, most of Florida's rail lines are not fenced, and many have no signage describing the areas around rail lines as private property that poses many dangers. **SB 320 was heard in the Senate Transportation Committee on March 6th but failed thanks to the efforts of Senator Alex Villalobos. The bill was brought back on motion to reconsider on March 13th and passed with a vote of 4-3 when Senator Margolis left the meeting to present a bill in another committee. The bill's next stop is the Senate Criminal Justice Committee.**



Check out our New Home on the Web!

At long last the Florida AFL-CIO has a new website to make online communications and activism easier and more enjoyable. Our old web site, created when the web was still relatively new served us well, but we needed a change. Beginning this week our new site is live and online at www.flaficio.org. The basic frame of the site is up, although there is not much content yet. In between all of session activities, we will be putting content up every day until completed. This site will have many new features that we will be bringing on line in the weeks ahead. All of our publications will be readily available, press clips from around the state updated every hour and soon we will have a live

blog so that all our of our members can weigh in on the issues of the day. We wanted to launch the site now while it is still in development so that we can get your feedback. Check out the site and email us at rtemplin@flaficio.org and let us know the features you would like to see added.

www.flaficio.org

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