



LEGISLATIVE UPDATE

2011 FLORIDA LEGISLATURE

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Issue 1

Class Warfare in the Sunshine State!



Florida's working families are under attack! Instead of using the current economic crisis as a time to reject the partisan rhetoric and use it as a time to come together and put the country first, many of these governors and other elected officials are using their time in office to take hits on President Obama, and give breaks to large corporations. Under the guise of having a budget crisis, politicians, who were elected to create jobs, have used this opportunity to destroy the foundation of the middle class. Whether its stripping collective bargaining rights from public employees in Wisconsin or radically changing Florida's Retirement System, the mission of these politicians is simple, it's not to create jobs, but to further privatize jobs already in existence and silence the voice of working people.

Politicians have some nerve making working families pay for tax giveaways for their corporate donors. There has never been a time in America when the income inequalities have been as severe as they are now. The wages of workers have stagnated since the 1970s even though productivity remains at an all time high. Meanwhile the richest in America own more than ever before. Corporate profits are at an all time high, but corporations are paying lower taxes than ever before (with some paying none at all) The current Forbes 400 which are the 400 wealthiest people in America have the same assets as half of the country (roughly 150,000,000+ people) combined. In Florida, we have a Governor who made his profits from ripping off tax payers through health care fraud. Whose plan to create jobs is to eliminate jobs already in existence and by privatizing services that no corporation should be able to make a profit off of, all the while denying workers a chance at employment by denying our state access to a transportation infrastructure of the 21st century. His refusal to aid the working people of this state is compounded when Governor Scott is demanding cuts to corporate taxes and giving business a break on unemployment insurance.

However, working people aren't being passive and allowing these bills to pass, instead the public outcry against these legislative attacks has been tremendous. Last week in Wisconsin over 200,000 people came to protest. In Florida, Awake the State rallies brought out thousands of Floridians that collectively question the policies and decisions of the state government. Awake the State was not an event created by organized labor, but the message and reasons for the rallies tied directly into the assaults against working people. That is what solidarity is about. People are realizing what unions have done for the country and more importantly what the newly elected politicians' plans for America are, and they are scared. More and more people are putting the pieces together and realizing what organized labor has done for their own working conditions, even if they never belonged to a union. Now is the time, brothers and sisters, to fight back against the corporate elites and politicians that want to make Florida into their tropical tax haven! The politician's complete disregard of the middle class will continue to be their theme this session. People across Florida aren't buying the corporate agenda and they're joining their neighbors to stand up against it!

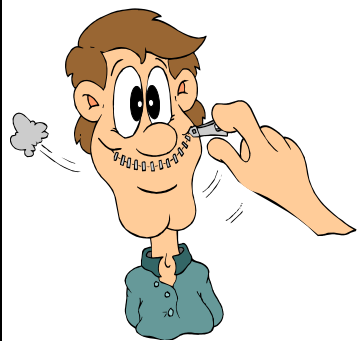


Worker Gag Bill

The Florida Legislature has jumped on the national bandwagon in pushing forward with legislation designed to eliminate the voice of our public employee unions. Like the anti worker legislation across the country, Senate Bill 830 only targets unions. This would mean that groups like the Florida Chamber of Commerce would have a voice in politics, but working families would be silent. **This is union busting - pure and simple.** SB 830 by Sen. Thrasher (R S-8) and HB 1021 by Reps. Dorworth (R H-34) and Gaetz (R H-4) would make the following changes to state law regarding how public employee unions operate.

- Dues Deductions - These bills make it **illegal** for any public sector employer to deduct union dues or any other assessments.
- Political Activity - This legislation will make it almost impossible for public sector unions to use their resources for electoral activity or legislative advocacy. There will be new and perhaps insurmountable bureaucratic hurdles for unions to navigate to exercise the members' basic rights to participate in our democracy.

SB 830 was up in the Senate Community Affairs Committee and was met with dozens of union members, leaders and students who gathered outside the committee room, with their mouths taped shut, in silent protest of this bill that would gag workers across the state of Florida. The goal was to show the media and the Senators what Florida politics would look like under a regime where the big business lobby was the only game in town. The protest was a great success and garnered good coverage in the media. (For video visit our YouTube site). The committee meeting ended before discussion could begin. HB 1021 was discussed in the House State Affairs Committee on Thursday, intentionally scheduled during a critical hearing on the state pension system on another floor. Over 60 activists attended the meeting where a small group of representatives from our coalition spoke about the bill. When the last speaker finished, all 60 filed out of the room leaving it empty with the exception of lobbyists from the Florida Chamber of Commerce and other business groups and a few, self-proclaimed "Tea Party" members. A press release regarding this action is available on our website. The measure passed with a 12-6 party-line vote. Its next stop is the House Appropriations Committee.



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Working Families Lobby Corps Reflections

For the first time in Florida AFL-CIO history we have a presence in Tallahassee unlike ever before that puts working families in an active role in fighting against the assault on the middle class. Each week, the Legislative Newsletter will share activists' thoughts on their time here at the capitol.

"I am reasonably active in politics already but I was shocked at how this group of legislators was against working families! Not just unions as I kind of expected but all working class people in the state. There was more anti middle class legislation introduced and actually slammed through committees than I have ever seen done on any opening week ever. There were also direct attacks on organized labor, not veiled threats but actual outright attacks naming labor organizations as the bad guys against Floridians. It was enough to make you sick! All the more reason to continue to fight the good



Teacher “Quality” or How to Destroy the Foundation of American Democracy:

Last year, Senate Bill 6 created outrage and disgust across the state, as concerned parents, students and teachers mobilized unlike never before to stop this piece of horrid legislation that would have decimated public education in the state. Senate bill 6 was vetoed by Governor Crist, who was praised for standing up to his own party and showed that there was still hope for a powerful education system in the state. Sadly, this rejection of drastic changes to education, based solely on ideology, was missed by the majority. In the opening weeks of the 2011 Legislative Session, teachers, students and the foundation of public education were all put at risk through the passage of SB 736/HB 7019 – known by some as “*Son of Senate Bill 6*” . Representative Sands (HD-98) stated on the Floor of the House that “today is the day that this bad bill turns Florida into an educational wasteland...This Republican sponsored bill essentially fires nearly every teacher each year...This bill does great harm to Florida’s children and their future.” This is part of a larger concerted effort to radically alter Florida’s public education system. The Son of Senate Bill 6 is only one part of the plan as Governor Scott wants to cut 10 percent of public school funding and creating a new tax on teachers through changes in their retirement. Representative Kriseman (D H-35) explained “this bill is nothing more than an attack on public school teachers. That’s it. That’s all. It attacks teachers, maybe because they’re the easiest target, or because they may belong to unions, or maybe it’s because those who support this bill may not like teachers’ politics”.



Senate Bill 736 was voted out of the Senate during the first week of session, which brought both bills to the house for final debate and passage. The debate on the floor was heated, sadly and far too often, corporately funded politicians focus on hyperbole instead of actually providing facts. There was constant rhetoric stating “our research finds this...and the research indicates that...” but at no time did they ever mention who conducted the research or offer any empirical data to back their statements. As Representative Taylor (D H27) stated on the floor “this is an unproven experiment with our children with no data, no pilot program...we are moving down uncharted territory”. More and more politicians highlighted their own business experience and compared it to the public school system. Comparisons that link business models to education systems is disingenuous, our schools are not businesses, teachers are not a tool to be used like a machine in a shop and students are not commodities that are packaged and sold to consumers. Their comparison of school to business models highlights the corporate ideology of this legislature and how they view public education, which stands as the foundation for our democracy. Representative Rogers relayed this message by stating on the floor that “for Florida to compete for business and retain business, we must demonstrate that we have the best and brightest workforce. This bill is not good for business. If we cannot reward highly effective teachers with job security then we will lose the crème de la crème of our workforce and doom our state to the only business that can survive in this economy and that is the prison system.”

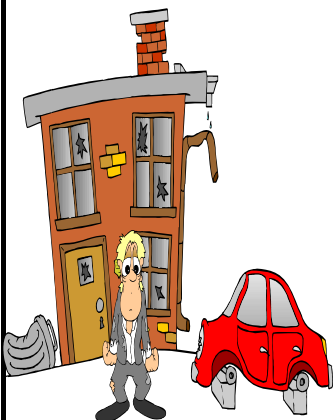
Unemployment Insurance: Kicking Workers When They’re Down

The House passed its first bill of the Session. Unfortunately it was the disastrous legislation that gives big business another tax break by taking lifeline benefits away from the unemployed. With record unemployment in the state of Florida, it is sad that the legislature feels they must punish the victims of the economic crisis. Even though there aren’t enough jobs in the state for workers, and unemployment insurance is the best economic stimulator we have, the legislature again put ideology ahead of common sense and fairness.

The bill:

- Makes it easier to lay off or terminate workers without providing unemployment benefits.
- Places additional hurdles in front of workers trying to get benefits.
- Reduces the possible weeks of unemployment benefits from 26 to 20 weeks, with the maximum being as low as 12 weeks in times of low unemployment.
- Reduces the “Experience Rating” tax rate calculation for businesses by 10%.

200 unemployed workers from around Florida converged on the Capitol in protest of the bill but the majority pushed it through, after changing the rules and placing serious restrictions on debate. The measure passed with a party-line vote. The Senate version is much better than the House. It still places additional burdens on the unemployed but does not reduce benefits.



We Awoke the State Now it's Time to Take it Back!

Are you ready to stand up? The April 7th Rally will **no longer take place in Tallahassee** instead we will focus on local demonstrations of solidarity and resistance that will happen in communities **throughout Florida on April 4-7th!** These rallies will also commemorate Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. who gave his life while defending public employees rights to form a union. In addition to the April demonstrations The Florida AFL-CIO's affiliates will be joining community partners in **Fight Back Florida rallies throughout the state on March 25th.** Please contact your Zone Coordinators for information on both of these very important displays of collective power and strength.



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"WE CAN NO LONGER LIVE
IN A SOCIETY
WHERE THE PUBLIC EMPLOYEES
ARE THE HAVES AND
TAXPAYERS WHO FOOT THE
BILLS ARE THE HAVE-NOTS."*



*Actual quote:
Scott Walker,
New Republican
Governor of Wisconsin

WE ARE GOING TO LIVE
IN A SOCIETY
WHERE THEY ARE ALL
HAVE-NOTS.



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HUCK

Working Families Lobby Corps is in full swing.
Are you ready to be a freedom fighter for working families?

These last two weeks were not only the start of session but were the first weeks of the Florida AFL-CIO's new and bold legislative program: Working Families Lobby Corps.

This legislative program puts you, the activist, in the driver's seat on important issues that face all working people. Slots are still available for you to come up in Tallahassee for a week. Talk to your CLC leadership or Phyllis Garrett at pgarrett@flafclio.org or (850) 224-6926 to register.

