

Sunday, April 3, 2011

Necessary change: Editorial

Public appreciates its employees, but fiscal reality underlies SB 5

<http://www.dispatchpolitics.com/live/content/editorials/stories/2011/04/03/necessary-change.html?adsec=politics&sid=101>

Now that Ohio Senate Bill 5 is about to become law with Gov. John Kasich's signature and the fight over collective-bargaining rules moves to its likely next phase — a referendum fight in the November election — a re-examination of the dispute is in order.

Opponents of the bill, which substantially reduces the power of unions to influence public spending, characterize it as an attack on teachers, police, firefighters and civil servants. It isn't.

What Senate Bill 5 addresses is a serious imbalance in power over the public purse in Ohio that evolved over the 30 years since the collective-bargaining law was passed. The law gave unions the ability to make virtually all aspects of their employment subject to bargaining. And political expedience led many school boards, city councils and other local governments to acquiesce to unions' demands.

When unions and local governments did reach a bargaining impasse, in many cases binding-arbitration rules put the outcome — and thus, the public's budget — in the hands of an unaccountable third party.

That never has been sound public policy, but it was accepted when economic conditions supported it. Now, it is inappropriate and unsustainable. Ohio is in dire financial straits. Restoring taxpayer control over labor costs isn't just essential to coping with a huge budget deficit; it also is fair and appropriate.

None of that reflects poorly on the value of public employees or their work.

When police officers, firefighters and teachers sit down to negotiate with their local-government employer, they're negotiating with their own community. Do they really believe that the people for whom they work — their neighbors, members of their church, club or PTO — want to hurt them?

This doesn't make sense. All communities value their teachers, their police officers and their firefighters.

After all, parents want to have good teachers in their schools and will pay enough to attract them. Taxpayers understand that their lives and property depend upon having well-equipped police officers and firefighters who are compensated fairly.

Saying the public no longer can afford the costs that have accumulated through years of union contracts in no way demonizes public employees. Nor does pointing out that their benefit packages and salary expectations — automatic pay increases, generous medical and pension plans with relatively low employee contributions and potentially huge payouts for unused sick leave — outstrip those of many of the taxpayers footing the bill.

The state and local communities have reached a point where those burdens simply can't be borne anymore without asking taxpayers, many of whom have faced stagnant wages and shrinking benefits, to give even more. That inability to pay more is compounded by the hundreds of thousands of Ohioans who have lost their jobs and therefore can make no contribution at all.

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