

Fiscal Conservatives, Progressives Look to Pending Battle over SB5

As House members debated the inevitability of SB5's (Jones) passage Wednesday, Republicans moved forward with a communications campaign to defend the public employment bill at the ballot box. House Speaker Bill Batchelder (R-Medina) unveiled the website SB5Truth.com to gather individual support for the collective bargaining rollback -- an effort that will be paid for by the Ohio Republican Organizing Committee (OHROC) and administered in part by the House Majority Caucus. Senate Republicans have joined the cause and may launch a web campaign of their own, according to Batchelder.

"There is a great deal of misrepresentation and outright fraud in this area," the speaker said at a midday press conference, anticipating a union ballot campaign against SB5 that could run as high as \$20 million, according to estimates Wednesday.

There is less clarity, however, on where the GOP will get the money to battle unions in the run-up to an expected referendum on government collective bargaining.

"I have no idea at this point," Batchelder said. "We do not have a finance plan put together. We will do the best we can in raising money."

For the time being, OHROC will absorb the cost of the website, which will be administered in part by House majority spokesman Mike Dittoe. "I suppose they're going to bill me for it," Batchelder said.

The website solicits names and contact information with the call to action, "Save our state! Support SB5."

Batchelder, who was joined by SB5 point man Speaker Pro Tempore Lou Blessing (R-Cincinnati), and Reps. Matt Huffman (R-Lima), Barbara Sears (R-Maumee), John Adams (R-Sidney) and Cheryl Grossman (R-Grove City), also screened a short video segment enlisting the support of Cuyahoga Falls Mayor Don Robart (R), Hamilton County Commissioner Greg Hartmann (R) and Toledo Mayor Mike Bell (I), who was endorsed by police and fire unions and private labor organizers in his 2009 election.

Republican legislators were asked whether the caucus next plans to go after commercial unions.

"No," Blessing said flatly. "The situation with private unions is quite different. ... We have an obligation in state government to take care of public employees."

Batchelder concurred, denying any intention to take on private employee unions. Huffman interjected to say companies and unions have equal interest in negotiating workable contracts that allow products and services to succeed and both sides to thrive. He suggested taxpayers are on the hook, however, whether or not governments and public employees negotiate reasonable contracts.

"If you have a fact-finder that doesn't always split the baby, they don't get hired," Blessing added after the press conference, saying SB5 will return negotiating power back to government managers.

He also responded to competing suggestions that legislators should also consider a pay cut. He noted Ohio is ranked 50th nationally for legislative expenditures. "I earn my pay, and I'm not ashamed of what I make," Blessing said. "I'm not going to support a pay cut."

He also addressed the looming question of public employees who wish to opt out of union membership and "fair share" contributions, which could spur unions to block employee access to collectively bargained salary, benefits and other workplace concessions.

"We'll find out," Blessing said. "That wouldn't bother us in the least."

Elsewhere, word circulated around Capitol Square that the chamber of commerce had signaled its intention to match union expenditures on the ballot referendum. The U.S. Chamber of Commerce and the Ohio Chamber of Commerce denied the rumor in response to calls from *Hannah News*, however.

"That is not coming from the Ohio Chamber," its vice president of communications, Julie Feasel, said. "We represent private companies, not public entities."

The U.S. Chamber was slightly less emphatic. "At this point, I would say we are not," said Communications Director J.P. Fielder.

Later Wednesday, Protect Ohio Families, which has launched a competing website in opposition to SB5, said the collective bargaining overhaul represents an attack on all working Ohioans, public or private.

A state corrections officer joined a Kroger dairy manager, a Columbus businessman, and a Middletown councilmember at the Statehouse news conference as the House of Representatives prepared for final floor debate on the bill. Ohio Education Association President Pat Frost also attended.

"If working families band together, we can win," the Kroger employee said, looking to a likely ballot referendum on SB5.

Said Mike Patrick of Patrick Solutions, Inc., "This is not how you build businesses, by laying people off."

Frost also defended Columbus City Schools and other urban districts, which currently fail most state performance indicators, against any suggestion their teachers under-perform in comparison to their pay and benefits.

"Our education staff give great quality to their students every day," she said. "The public does get the quality that teachers provide, whether it be urban, suburban or rural schools."

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