

Louisiana Federation of Teachers

Weekly Legislative Digest

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Panel votes to silence public employees

Despite the best arguments of teachers, firefighters, police officers and other public servants, the House Labor and Industrial Relations Committee approved a bill that will make it inconvenient for employees to join and maintain membership in the union or association of their choice.

The purpose of HB 418 by Rep. Stuart Bishop (R-Lafayette) is to weaken unions like the Louisiana Federation of Teachers and Louisiana Association of Educators. These are the groups that have raised questions about, and led the opposition to, so-called “reforms” backed by big business that all too often result in the privatization of education and diminution of the teaching profession.

HB 418 would revoke the right of public employees to pay their union or association dues through payroll deduction. Since local governments currently have the authority to grant payroll deduction, the bill is seen by school boards and others as legislative meddling in their prerogatives.

The bill is the brainchild of the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry, which has been twisting the arms of lawmakers to force its passage. The big business lobby recruited the Koch brothers backed Americans for Prosperity to publicly promote the bill.

It is an example of what columnist Stephanie Grace, in another context, called “an ugly yet ascendant strain in American politics, a willingness to use any means necessary, no matter what chaos ensues or who gets hurt.”

The vitriol motivating the bill’s supporters was on full display when an amendment was proposed to exempt the teacher unions from its prohibitions. Shreveport-area Rep. Alan Seabaugh bellowed “Hell no” when his name was called on a roll call vote.

LFT President Steve Monaghan passionately opposed the bill at the hearing, which was archived and can be viewed on line [at this link](#).

Monaghan went straight to the real intent of the bill: silencing political speech with which LABI disagrees. It is “template legislation” that mirrors similar efforts in states around the country, he said.

The LFT president noted that Rep. Bishop’s bill does nothing to regulate the political speech of other organizations that are funded by payroll deduction. Some 30 corporations with payroll deduction privileges made \$257 million in political contributions, he said. Blue Cross Blue Shield alone, which collected premiums through payroll deduction, has made some \$32 million in political contributions.

Monaghan pointed out that many lawmakers would rather that LABI not make this bill its key issue in this legislative session.

“Deep in their hearts,” Monaghan said, “most lawmakers do not want to have to vote on HB 418.”

LAE President Debbie Meaux asked the committee to not single out unions for unfair treatment. “Our dues money is used to honor and help educators,” she said.

Unions were not without supporters on the committee.

When some members tried to claim that their aim is not to silence unions, Rep. Marcus Hunter (D-Monroe) punctured their hypocrisy. “If you just want to bust unions,” he said, “then be transparent about it.”

Rep. Patricia Smith (D-Baton Rouge) called the bill “an atrocity,” correctly noting that the bill restricts the rights of school boards. “It’s the state telling locals what to do,” she said.

Rep. Kenny Cox (D-Natchitoches) said “The reason for the bill is to silence opposition to big business.”

Numerous opponents testified against the bill for better than two hours. A sampling of their comments:

Louisiana School Boards Association Executive Director Scott Richard said that payroll deduction is a local issue that should be left to local choice.

AFL-CIO Secretary Treasurer Julie Cherry said “This bill to me is ill-timed, ill-advised and ill-informed. This is un-American.”

Jefferson Federation of Teachers President Meladie Munch told the committee, “You insult us by telling us that we’re not smart enough to know if we want something taken out of our paychecks.”

Red River United President Jackie Lansdale noted that the Caddo Parish School Board passed a resolution opposing the revocation of dues deduction.

The union, Lansdale said, “represents a movement that cares about kids, that cares about teachers and school staff.”

East Baton Rouge Federation of Teachers President Carnell Washington said that the union provides professional development for teachers that is not funded by the legislature. With an election approaching, Washington warned, “LABI may have all the money, but we have the votes.”

Baton Rouge firefighter Chad Major told the panel, “LABI just wants this bill to stomp on the middle class.”

Shreveport Police Union President Michael Carter said, “This bill has malicious intent. It is maliciously intended to stop unions.”

Baton Rouge Police Union President Chris Stewart termed the bill’s moniker, the Payroll Protection Act, “hogwash” because members are free to join or not in a Right to Work state like Louisiana.

Board of Elementary and Secondary Education Member Lottie Beebe, who is also superintendent of schools in St. Martin Parish, said that unions representing public employees “the voices of those in the trenches.”

“This bill is just another attempt to vilify Louisiana educators and the education system,” she said.

Parent and public school advocate Belinda Davis said, “HB 418 isn’t about saving the state money. It’s about silencing the voices of teachers.”

Despite their best arguments, the bill was approved by nine to six, largely along party lines, with all of the committee’s Republicans and one Independent voting in favor, and all of the Democratic members voting against.

The committee vote is the beginning, not the end of the fight. As the battle for member rights moves to the floor of the house, Monaghan said it is important for members to contact their own representatives and tell them to vote NO when HB 418 is heard by the full House.

The LFT Action Center already has a campaign online to click and send a message to lawmakers about HB 418. [Click here to send a message.](#)

Here’s how the members voted:

FOR HB 418: Reps. Stuart Bishop (R-Lafayette), Chris Broadwater (R-Hammond), Lane Harris (R-Alexandria), Valarie Hodges (R-Denham Springs), Blake Miguez (R-Erath), Jerome Richard (I-Thibodaux), Clay Schexnayder (R-Gonzales), Alan Seabaugh (R-Shreveport) and Lenar Whitney (R-Houma).

AGAINST HB 418: Reps. Kenny Cox (D-Natchitoches), Mickey Guillory (D-Eunice), Marcus Hunter (D-Monroe), Vincent Pierre (D-Lafayette), Patricia Smith (D-Baton Rouge) and Alfred Williams (D-Baton Rouge).

Diminished tobacco tax moves forward

A key committee charged with finding revenue for the state backed away from raising cigarette taxes demonstrated just how hard it will be to plug the looming \$1.6 billion deficit hole in the state budget.

HB 119 by Rep. Harold Ritchie (D-Bogalusa) was intended to raise cigarette taxes by \$1.18 per pack to raise \$240 million per year. When the smoke cleared in the committee room, the bill advanced but Rep. Ritchie's increase had been reduced to 32 cents per pack, making it level with the Mississippi tax.

Instead of raising nearly \$240 million per year, the increase will now raise just \$67 million.

Panel okays bill curbing suspensions of youngest students

A bill prohibiting out-of-school suspensions for children in grades K-3 was approved by the Senate Education Committee.

Sen. Sharon Weston-Broome, the author of SB 54, told the panel that more than 7,400 children in Kindergarten first, second and third grades were suspended from school last year

"I would like to cut the school-to-prison pipeline, and one of the ways we can do this is by showing concern for 5, 6, 7 and maybe 8-year-olds for their educational journey," said Sen. Broome.

Current law allows even the youngest children to be suspended out of school for willful disobedience, intentional disrespect toward teachers and principals, profane language, carrying firearms, bullying or school disturbances.

Despite the bill's good intentions, opponents said that unless schools have adequate resources to deal with disruptive students, suspension is the only way to be fair to other students and their teachers.

"We cannot allow a single student to disrupt the education of others," said Principals Association Executive Director Debbie Schum.

LFT President Steve Monaghan said that while the intent of the bill is noble, schools do not always have the ability to provide the services that disruptive children require. Because of budget restrictions, many school systems have cut back on alternatives such as in-school suspension or after-school detention.

In spite of the objections, the bill was unanimously approved by the committee, and moves to the Senate floor for further action.

Orleans Parish sex ed bill proceeds

Following an often contentious debate, the House Education Committee approved a bill mandating sex education for students in seventh through 12th grade in Orleans Parish.

Rep. Wesley Bishop (D-New Orleans) said that his HB 359 is necessary because the city faces a crisis of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases. Current law allows, but does not require, school districts to provide age-appropriate sex education in grades seven and up.

If the New Orleans bill passes, parents will be allowed to opt their children out of the classes. In grades three through six, sex education would be optional.

Topics mentioned in the bill are pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, contraception and parenting skills. Abstinence would be recommended as the only foolproof method of preventing pregnancy.

Despite opposition from the Louisiana Family Forum and the Archdiocese of New Orleans, the committee approved buy bill on an 8-6 vote. It moves to the House floor for further action.

In other action, legislators approved HB 345 by Rep. Frank Hoffman (R-west Monroe), which authorizes a panel called the Act 240 subcommittee to continue its investigation into the teacher evaluation process.

The committee also approved HB 695 by Rep. Neil Abramson (D-New Orleans), which aims to clarify a law passed last year governing how children may be loaded and unloaded from school buses.

Teacher evaluation bill is deferred

A bill which would have decreased the reliance of teacher evaluations on the Value Added Model was deferred by the Senate Education Committee.

SB 32 by Sen. Fred Mills (R-Parks) would have reduced the percentage of the Value Added score on teacher evaluations from 50% to 25%. The bill was voluntarily deferred. Senators saw little need to act upon it because the Value Added Model is currently under suspension, and may not be resurrected.

Panel denies retiree COLA

The House Retirement Committee rejected HB 42 by Rep. Sam Jones (D-Franklin), which would have provided a 1.5% cost of living adjustment for members of state retirement systems. The bill died in committee on a 6-6 tie vote.

Voting for the COLA were Reps. Frank Hoffman (R-West Monroe), Jones, Jack Montoucet (D-Crowley), Ed Price (D-Norco), Gene Reynolds (D-Minden) and Kirk Talbot (R-River Ridge). Voting against the COLA were Reps. Kevin Pearson (R-Slidell), Nick Lorusso (R-New Orleans), Paul Hollis (R-Covington), Barry Ivey (R-Baton Rouge), Greg Miller (R-Norco) and Darrell Ourso (R-Baton Rouge).

Return to work bills make progress

Bills aimed at allowing teachers to return to work without loss of retirement benefits made progress through committees.

HB 43 by Rep. Bernard LeBas (D-Ville Platte) was unanimously approved by the House Retirement Committee. The bill would increase the salary cap that a retiree of the Teachers' Retirement System of Louisiana who returns to work as a substitute teacher can earn from its current 25% to 50% of the retirement benefit. The bill moves to the House floor for action. LFT supports the bill.

The Senate Retirement Committee gave the nod to SB 20 by Sen. Gerald Long (R-Natchitoches). The bill expands the definition of "re-employment eligible positions" who may return to work without suspension of benefits. LFT supports this bill, which moves to the Senate floor for further action.

Medicaid expansion bills fail in committee

The House **Health and Welfare Committee** rejected several bills that would have expanded Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act. HCR 3 and HB 517 by Rep. John Bel Edwards (D-Amite) and HB 560 by Rep. Barbara Norton (D-Shreveport), were all deferred by the committee.

The week ahead...

Monday, May 4

The **House Appropriations Committee** and the **House Ways and Means Committee** will continue to debate numerous pieces of legislation aimed at creating a balanced budget for the coming fiscal year.

Wednesday, May 6

The **House Education Committee** will hear HB 21 by Rep. John Bel Edwards (D-Amite), which would prohibit the state from authorizing charter schools over the objection of local school boards, so long as the local district has an "A" or "B" designation. LFT supports the bill.

LFT also supports HB 180 by Rep. Joseph Bouie (D-New Orleans), which provides for the return of schools from the Recovery School District to the transferring local school system.

LFT supports HB 340 by Rep. John Bel Edwards, which scales back a current law allowing kindergarten children who are eligible for vouchers to attend a private or religious school regardless of the letter grade of their public school. HB 340 would limit those children to attending a voucher school only if the public school they would attend is graded "D" or "F".

LFT supports HB 410 by Rep. Patrick Williams (D-Shreveport), which guarantees each student no less than 20 minutes to eat lunch.

LFT supports HB 411 by Rep. Ted James (D-Baton Rouge), a proposed Constitutional Amendment which would allow postsecondary management boards, rather than the Board of regents, to control admission standards at public colleges and universities.

LFT opposes HB 505 by Rep. Barry Ivey (R-Baton rouge) which would prohibit any teacher hired after July 1, 2015 from ever earning tenure.

LFT opposes HB 524 by Rep. Darrell Ourso (R-Baton Rouge), a proposed Constitutional Amendment that would authorize the creation of independent school districts.

The Committee on House and Government Affairs will consider HB 651 by Rep. Randal Gaines, (D-LaPlace) which provides for automatic voter registration through drivers' license facilities. LFT supports the bill.