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Police Officers: "We Didn't Vote Republican To Get Stabbed In The Back"

February 13th, 2017

In the highly contentious battle to extinguish public worker rights, Iowa Republicans have attempted a divide-and-conquer approach to pit unions against each other. Their legislation splits public workers into two groups, one that's "public safety workers," and one that isn't. The idea was to strip away nearly all collective bargaining rights from most public employees, but keep most of it for police and firefighters, who are politically more difficult to go after.



It didn't work.

Hundreds of helmeted firefighters have flooded the Statehouse in the last week and police officers and sheriffs have lined up at committee hearings to speak against it. They don't trust that this carve-out for their jobs will last long, nor do many of them feel it's appropriate to deny the bargaining rights they have to fellow workers who have also had them for over 40 years.

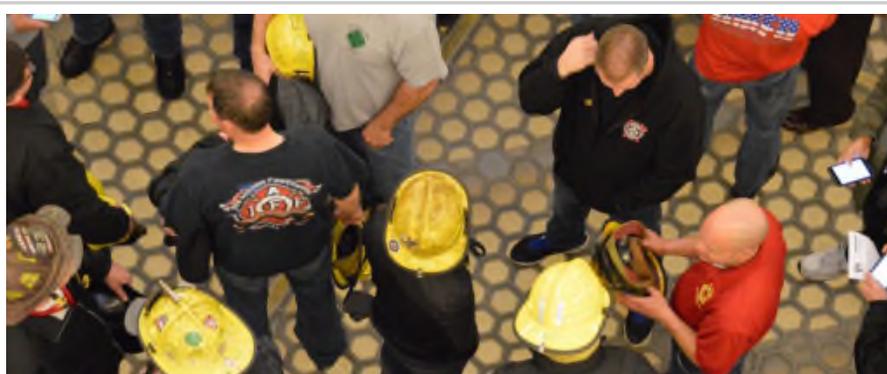
And several police officers and firefighters warned that Republicans' plan to create a special "public safety" class for negotiations wouldn't work in many cases. John Thomas, a police officer from Mitchellville, explained last week that some sheriff's deputies wouldn't get classified as "public safety" workers because there's more jailers and clerks in the bargaining unit. The Republican bill only classifies workers as "public safety" employees if a majority of workers in a bargaining unit is made up of police or firefighters.

That has many police officer, who voted for Republicans in large numbers this year, particularly upset.

"It's collective begging, that's what it is," Thomas labeled the bill at a subcommittee hearing. "Half of law enforcement folks I work with are Republicans. And we voted for Republicans because of conservative values. But we didn't vote for Republicans to get stabbed in the back while we're trying to dodge cars and bullets."

Even for those who do get covered as "public safety" workers, the other changes in the bill would still have damaging consequences. Removing the provisions for "just cause" firings means public workers could get the ax at whatever whim of their boss, with no potential recourse of action. Firefighters cautioned that could lead to a chilling effect on discussions over best safety practices.

"After a fire ... we sit down as a group, around a table and we talk about the fire," explained Doug Neis, head of the Iowa Professional Fire Fighters union. "We talk about what went good, what went bad, and about how to improve. In those meetings we need to be able to be critical sometimes of our administration and the decisions they make. This bill removes just cause. Our members across the state will be fearful of speaking up and being critical when they need to ... People are going to be in danger, our members and citizens."



the IOWA DAILY DEMO

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Even some sheriffs are concerned over what impact it will have on their departments and community. Dave Drew, the Republican sheriff from Woodbury County in conservative Northwest Iowa, told Republican legislators that he's worried they'd target them next.

"We stand as one," Drew said of public workers. "It's important to stand together. Because what you may give us or let us stay in, the firefighters and public safety, two years from now we may be out. We stand as one for the right reason: collective bargaining and Chapter 20 works."



Woodbury County Sheriff Drew address a committee

Drew also questioned the rationale behind the "public safety" designation, pointing out that plenty of public workers beyond just police and firefighters contribute to keeping Iowans safe.

"When we're out cleaning up a scene, the troopers and the deputies and the firefighters, here comes the state plow to help to clear it off," Drew continued. "They're alongside us in the snow storms. I just can't think of how this can be shredded apart."

The Iowa House will hold what is likely the last full public hearing on the collective bargaining bill tonight. Republicans are likely to vote it through both chambers quickly this week, just six or seven days after it was officially introduced.

by Pat Rynard
Posted 2/13/17



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