Teamsters, workers win initial Delaware RTW battle

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Holding signs are Local 355 members (L-R) Lynnwood Bowe, Burris Foods; John Caparatta, Jr., Penn Fibre; (not visable) Gil Howdershelt, Burris Foods; and Chris Johnson, Burris Foods.

Jan. 4, 2018 | Delaware Teamsters joined hundreds of their union brothers and sisters this week in pushing back against a county effort to institute a right to work (RTW) provision that would curtail workers’ collective bargaining rights and tamp down on wages for thousands in Sussex County.

A vote on the RTW measure was postponed Tuesday after it became clear the vast majority of those in attendance were against it. The overflow crowd spread outside of the council chambers, where Teamsters and other union members rallied in the frigid cold against the anti-worker ordinance. The legislation, however, could be brought back up for consideration as soon as next week.

[Sussex County resident Chris Johnson (right), a Local 355 shop steward employed by Burris Foods, Inc., was among dozens of speakers who voiced opposition to the RTW provision. "I speak to you as a Teamster member but also as a resident, a father and husband... I'm proud to be a union member earning a good wage that supports my family," Johnson told the five-member Council, adding that he and his members bargain for all they have, including good wages, a grievance process and the right to arbitrate. "But the bargaining procedure is not free or cheap. Our dues structure is built to pay for the collective bargaining that help us support our middle-class communities." Johnson also pointed out that as a member of the Millennial generation, he may be in the minority, but "we're out here and we're against right-to-work laws."]
"We see that they at least heard our voices that this is a more complicated issue than they thought," said Paul Thornburg, Secretary-Treasurer of Local 326 based in New Castle, Del. "This is people’s livelihoods. They saw that."

Local 355 members and other Teamsters joined with Local 326 to voice their disgust with the RTW effort, which the Sussex County Council’s own attorney called illegal. Because Delaware is a free bargaining state, a locality cannot on its own to implement such a policy. The county attorney warned that passage of such an anti-worker ordinance would lead to legal action against the jurisdiction and cost taxpayers at least $250,000.

Thornburg said in recent years there have been efforts pushed by state GOP lawmakers to approve so-called RTW. But Democrats have succeeded in blocking them. So when County Councilman Ron Arlett announced in October that he was introducing such an ordinance in the southernmost and most conservative county in Delaware, it was unexpected.

"I was shocked. It was a mad scramble," Thornburg said. "We were really shocked because we talked on the state level and it’s been thrown out. When it came to local law, we didn’t think it was legal."

Local jurisdictions have increasingly sought to implement RTW, the effect on workers be damned. Last month, for instance, elected officials in Seaford, Del., which is part of Sussex County, approved their own such measure. Counties in other states have mulled similar actions as well.

These efforts have received the support of the American City County Exchange, an offshoot of the American Legislative Exchange Council, which pushes anti-worker meausreurs and offers model legislation to its conservative members.

But these attempts need to be called out for what they are -- a corporate-fueled attack on everyday people who are just trying to earn a living to support their families. It’s part of a national effort being pushed by the same big companies and business executives who for years have boosted their profits by sending American jobs overseas. These special interests are trying to lower wages and cut benefits for workers so they can increase their profits even more.

RTW in all its forms is still wrong for workers.

Cross-posted from teamster.org with added quotes from Chris Johnson.

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