

Political payback to organized labor took precedence over sticking up for middle class families in the Iowa House on Wednesday and Thursday. House Democrats, under cover of darkness, brought up the most far-reaching revisions to Iowa's collective bargaining since its inception in 1974. Back then it took the Iowa House 13 days to debate the bill it was so controversial. House Democrats jammed the revisions through in about 13 hours of debate most of which came during the night.

House File 2645 was scheduled to be debated on Wednesday. Democrats camouflaged it as a non-controversial set of technical changes. In order for any amendment to be eligible for the debate on Wednesday, any amendments must be filed by 4 p.m. the day before. At 4 p.m. on Tuesday afternoon, Democrats dropped a 14 page amendment (H-8164 written by organized labor) onto HF 2645. This last minute maneuver is common in the legislature when a legislator or party wants to hide their intentions until the last minute to avoid and negative media coverage or pushback from the public.

The bill, with the amendment, adds several mandatory bargaining items to the teacher quality law and eliminates some provisions that provided a balance between management and labor. The changes significantly tilt the playing field in favor of labor. The Des Moines Register reported on 3-20-08 that "school boards would lose much of their authority to determine a number of issues, including scheduling, class size and early retirement benefits for staff..."

None however were as controversial as the House Democrats attempt to sneak through the wildly controversial "Fair Share" provision. "Fair Share" is not fair. It is forced unionism. The House Democrats plan allowed forced unionism, which is currently illegal, to be placed onto the bargaining table by public employee unions. Forced unionism legislation like "Fair Share" forces non-union public employees - like teachers- to pay union dues. The only way for public employees to avoid paying union dues is to quit their jobs. The effect of any forced unionism legislation is the same as a direct repeal of the Right to Work law.

House File 2645 is a Trojan Horse in which organized labor hoped to subvert Iowa's Right to Work law and codify a laundry list of the teacher's union hopes and desires.

However, House Republicans sacked the Trojan Horse and Democrats were forced to offer a provision that prevents any forced unionism provisions from finding their way to the bargaining table.

That, however, was just the *non*-controversial section of the bill.

The rest of the House Democrat's plan stripped school board members, city council members and county supervisors of their ability to control the level of property tax increases. That ability is forfeited to an unnamed and unelected adjudicator. The reason is because property taxes makeup the vast majority of local government revenue and pay for nearly all of any employee contract. If the costs for that contract increase, so do property taxes.

During debate on the floor, Democratic Representative Delores Mertz, a former county supervisor, and Democratic Representative Deborah Barry, a former city council member, both admitted that the bill might result in property tax increases. Democratic Representative Doris Kelley from Cedar Falls admitted that the bill very well could result in tuition increases at the University of Northern Iowa.

By increasing what is eligible in negotiations between management and labor, House Democrats exposed property taxpayers to a series of tax increases. Organized labor doesn't ask to bargain for things if they do not plan to increase the benefits to their members. Which is great for union members but bad for taxpayers because taxpayers are the people who foot the bill for public sector union salary and benefit increases.

Currently in the items which can be discussed in the scope of union bargaining are: Wages, vacations, holidays, seniority, transfer procedures, job classifications, procedures for staff reduction, in-service training.

Items that Democrats are adding to the list: Work shift schedules, insurance carriers, leaves of absence, shift differentials, overtime compensation, supplemental pay, health or safety matters, evaluation procedures, preparation time, class size, work uniforms, staffing levels, retirement systems.

With public employee unions able to bargain for that list of items, what use is there for managers, principals or superintendants anymore?

The specific language of the bill forces school districts and local governments to pay for whatever the eventual employment agreement is between labor and management. The language also states that if there is an impasse, an adjudicator decides between the two positions. Which means that if the adjudicator makes a decision on class size that forces a school district to hire more teachers or build new classrooms to meet the bargained class size number, the school district must levy property taxes to cover those increased costs. The only alternative is to cut something that the district is currently offering to shift those resources to cover the newly bargained for benefits.

House Republicans offered an amendment (H-8211) which would have prevented property tax increases from going into effect as a result of anything contained in this bill. Naturally, House Democrats voted along party lines to defeat it.

During debate on H-8211 Democratic Representative Mary Mascher of Iowa City went to the extreme measure of tracking down a state trooper in the Capitol Building and had him physically remove a guest of Republican Leader Rants from the floor of the House. Leader Rants had two of his local Sioux City School Board members at the Capitol Thursday to witness first hand the devastating impact this bill would have on their ability to control costs for the Sioux City School District. It seems Democrats are so embarrassed by their own actions that they didn't want any eyewitnesses.

Because House Republicans refused to back down and continued to debate the bill through the night, Democrats deployed a rarely used parliamentary tactic to cut off debate and set the vote to a time certain just before noon on March 20. At the time Democrats cut off debate, 34 House Republicans were in line to speak against the Democrat's plan.

What makes all of this even worse is that not only did the House Democrats hide their plan from Iowans, and not only did they push the debate up against the Easter Weekend, but they did it while most school administrators are on Spring Break vacation and not paying attention to what's happening at the Statehouse. But even worse than that, the Senate Democrats cleared the schedule on Thursday in order to be able to ram this bill through committee and the floor and down to the Governor before the weekend. Why? So local officials and other people who know the effect of tilting the bargaining table in favor of organized labor won't have time to talk to legislators and stop the bill from getting to the Governor.