

John Kasich Seeks To Stop Ohio Union Law Repeal Effort

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By **Julie Carr-Smyth and Ann Sanner**

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio Gov. John Kasich and top Republican lawmakers said Wednesday they're offering to discuss weakening a new law limiting collective bargaining in an attempt to keep a repeal effort off the November ballot.

Kasich's administration released a letter asking for a meeting Friday to discuss a compromise with 10 union leaders authorized to negotiate on behalf of We Are Ohio, the group pushing for a repeal of the law. Kasich, Senate President Tom Niehaus, and House Speaker William Batchelder discussed the letter at a hastily called afternoon news conference.

At the same time, Kasich, a first-term Republican, offered no guarantees for a compromise.

"Just because we talk doesn't mean we work it all out," Kasich said. "But I think the public would like (for) us to sit down and talk."

The two-page letter reiterates supporters' backing for the collective bargaining overhaul and their confidence they can win in the fall, but it also signals a desire to avoid a costly ballot battle. Kasich told reporters he thought the state was headed in the right direction.

In the letter, Kasich and the legislative leaders say voters and bond rating agencies have been increasingly frustrated with political brinksmanship in Washington surrounding the debate in Congress over the nation's debt limit.

"We have a fleeting opportunity in Ohio to take the higher road," they wrote.

We Are Ohio spokeswoman Melissa Fazekas said the group continues to oppose the collective bargaining measure and called on lawmakers to rescind it if they want to see the repeal question removed from the Nov. 8 ballot. She said the administration had never contacted We Are Ohio's campaign manager.

"I think it's awfully funny to now be standing here and talking about coming to the table when this entire bill takes away their rights to do so," she said.

The law restricts collective bargaining rights for more than 350,000 teachers, police officers, state employees and others. It bans public employee strikes and gets rid of automatic pay increases, replacing them with merit raises or performance pay.

It also allows public worker unions to negotiate wages, but not health care, sick time or pension benefits.

The measure was approved by the Republican-controlled state Legislature in March amid shouts and jeers from protesters in each chamber. Kasich, a first-term governor, signed it the same month, but it is blocked from taking effect until voters have their say.

His offer for a compromise came after a Wisconsin law limiting collective bargaining rights for most state employees prompted voters last week to recall two Republican state senators who supported it. They were among six lawmakers whom labor leaders had targeted.

Kasich and his Republican colleagues argue the Ohio legislation will help city officials, school superintendents and others control their costs at a time when they, too, are feeling budget woes.

Opponents contend the collective bargaining restrictions are an unfair attack on public employee unions that had worked cooperatively with their government employers for decades. They accuse lawmakers of exploiting a state budget crisis to pass a measure unpopular with a majority of Ohioans.

Senate Democratic Leader Capri Cafaro, whose caucus opposed the measure, interpreted Wednesday's letter as an admission by Kasich and GOP leaders that it is flawed.

"Unfortunately, it has taken too long for the governor and GOP leaders to acknowledge they overreached," Cafaro said.

Dale Butland, spokesman for the liberal think tank Innovation Ohio, questioned the sincerity of the Republicans' offer to negotiate.

"I think that it is a clumsy attempt to paint union workers as uncompromising and intransigent, but I think Ohioans are smarter than that," he said. "They know that a governor who calls police officers 'idiots' and promises to 'break the back' of teachers isn't interested in compromise."

The state has 655,000 union members, who constitute 13.7 percent of the work force, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. That's more than the U.S. average rate of 11.9 percent.

Ohio lawmakers have been on summer break since early July, and they would have to be called back to Columbus to take any action on the legislation.

Batchelder told reporters that he would not have a problem asking members to return for a repeal vote. "Whatever we have to do to get it done," he said.

"I hate what's about to happen here," Batchelder said after the news conference. "This is going to be the damndest mess anybody ever saw in terms of relationships between government and employees."

Asked whether the measure went too far, Batchelder said, "My sense would be that there were alternative ways to do it."

The most recent campaign filing reports show that the group seeking the repeal has raised about \$7 million.

The state's labor groups representing teachers, police officers and firefighters have also turned to their members to help pay for the repeal campaign.

A recent Quinnipiac University poll found that 56 percent of Ohio voters say the new collective bargaining law should be repealed, compared with 32 percent who favor keeping it in place.

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