

Debate underscores S.B. 5 controversy

Chief writer, critic clash in Columbus

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BY JIM PROVANCE, BLADE COLUMBUS BUREAU CHIEF

COLUMBUS -- Sparks flew yesterday as Ohio's controversial new collective bargaining law was debated as either a demonizing of government workers or a long overdue resetting of an imbalanced negotiations table.

One of the prime architects of Senate Bill 5, Sen. Keith Faber (R., Celina), and one of the law's chief critics, Dale Butland of the liberal research group Innovation Ohio, squared off in a debate hosted by the Columbus Metropolitan Club.

Both sides accused the other of lying about what the law would or would not do and engaging in dirty campaign tactics. Voters will weigh in themselves on Nov. 8 when they decide whether the law, appearing on the ballot as Issue 2, will survive or be scrapped.

Mr. Faber argued that the debate should be what's in the best interests of taxpayers, not union bosses and the politicians they help elect.

"Why is it that [Toledo Mayor Mike] Bell, a former firefighter, has said that he absolutely needs this to help manage his city?" he asked. "Why is it that the finance director of the city of Lima -- even when his mayor, who appointed him, said he didn't like Senate Bill 5 -- said it's absolutely necessary for Lima to be balanced?"

But Mr. Butland countered that talk of ailing government budgets, exacerbated by state budget cuts, is a smokescreen for what Senate Bill 5 is really all about.

"They are taking away workers' rights," he said. "They are reducing collective bargaining to a hollow shell -- no right to strike, no binding arbitration, management that invokes its own will. That is not collective bargaining. That is collective begging."

Mr. Faber, like the pro-Senate Bill 5 campaign, played up provisions of Senate Bill 5 that polls suggest are popular with voters -- requiring employees to pay at least 15 percent of the cost of their health insurance, prohibiting governments from paying part of the employees' share of their pension contributions, and dumping automatic pay increases based on longevity and educational attainment for a merit pay system.

"It is not unreasonable the reforms that are in this bill," he said.

"What's unreasonable is that 7 percent of Ohio workers expect the other 93 percent to pay them benefits that are out of line with what those other 93 percent are receiving. That's what this is all about."

Mr. Butland, however, countered that 90 percent of public employees already pay some of their health-care premiums, if not 15 percent, and that 94 percent of public workers pay the full 10 percent of their paychecks toward their own pensions.

He focused on provisions outlawing public employee strikes and scrapping binding arbitration as a means of ending contract disputes.

He specifically picked up on an issue that has been featured prominently in the anti-Senate Bill 5 campaign, a prohibition on negotiating minimum staffing levels at fire stations and on fire trucks. Toledo is among those cities with minimum staffing levels.

"Four firefighters on a truck are 30 percent more effective than three firefighters on a truck," Mr. Butland said. "Four firefighters on a truck are where you want to be."

Mr. Faber, however, countered that the fire chief should make those decisions, not union negotiators.

"Schools and local governments aren't broke because workers refuse to sacrifice," Mr. Butland said.

"They're broke because our governor refuses to ask the wealthiest Ohioans for any sacrifice at all."

He specifically pointed to the fact that lawmakers, just before approving a \$55.8 billion two-year budget, removed a provision, which Mr. Faber supported, that would have cut lawmakers' pay by 5 percent.

Mr. Faber countered, "Their solution is just to raise taxes, ask people to pay more."

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