

## Commissioners kill controversial right-to-work ordinance

Written by By Rick Abasta For the Sun  
Friday, 04 May 2018 08:09

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McKinley County Commissioners' regular meeting was the scene of yet another heated debate

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over right-to-work laws May 1, leading to packed attendance, with some attendees standing outside the door for a chance to listen in.

The May 1 meeting was the third hearing in a series of public discussions and hearings over a controversial ordinance that would allow employees joining unionized workplaces not to pay member dues to the unions. It would be their final action on the ordinance.

Commissioner Bill Lee sponsored the ordinance, which makes claims to stimulate economic development and commerce by changing the union payment system.

Carla J. Sonntag, president of New Mexico Business Coalition, spoke first and began by saying she has supported the right-to-work initiative in New Mexico for more than 20 years.

“Right-to-work is important,” Sonntag said. “We find it very challenging with the fact that we can’t get manufacturers to come to our state because we’re not right-to-work.”

The concept, she said, is simple: right-to-work is about giving the employee a choice of paying dues and joining a union or not. She added that businesses seeking locations to set up businesses heavily weigh their favor toward right-to-work states.

Two other individuals listed on the agenda spoke in favor of right-to-work, including Jay Block, Sandoval county commissioner.

He began by saying that he is not a politician.

Block recounted his military career and said he is a retired lieutenant colonel with the U.S. Air Force.

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During Block's 25 years of military service, he was not in a union nor is he in one now in the private sector, where he works as a nuclear weapons expert.

"I am tired of our state and most importantly, our people from losing out to our neighbors when it comes to capturing big job opportunities," Block said at the May 1 meeting. "Like Intel building a \$2 billion plant next door in Chandler, Arizona."

Block said other opportunities like the Tesla "Gigafactory" have passed by New Mexico because it lacks the right-to-work status.

Donald Gallegos, a union representative, spoke next and provided an opposing view. Gallegos represents unions for BNSF, Union Pacific, and bus drivers in Farmington.

The detriment of right-to-work can be seen on television, Gallegos said, adding that the teacher strikes occurring today are in right-to-work states—including Arizona.

"The unions have been weakened a little bit in those states," he said, referring to the high-profile strikes and walkouts by teachers organizing against low wages.

The discussion heated up when another voice opposing unions and in favor of the proposed right-to-work ordinance spoke up.

Roger Rael of Colfax County said he was not in favor of the unions, citing examples from his childhood.

"All I ever heard growing up was, 'I, I, I...unions...it's about me...my brothers and I done this and that,'" Rael said. "It's a self-personified view."

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Rael recounted the story of a union member who passed in the coal mining community of Raton and how the family struggled with funeral expenses. He said the deceased didn't have the support of his union brothers because they left him at the funeral home for more than six months after the funeral.

"These unions are horrible people. They have no morals. I don't give a damn about these unions and I'm not going to have it anymore," Rael yelled, slamming his hand on the podium.

Commissioner Genevieve Jackson called for order and said continued outbursts would result in Rael's removal from the premises.

Justin Tsosie of the United Mine Workers of America spoke next and asked the commissioners to oppose the measure.

He said Navajo teachings stress the importance of taking care of a job once it has been attained because employment will help an individual take care of his family and have a good life.

"That was the teaching that was brought to me by my elders, by my dad," Tsosie said. "He told me that in the future, if I got a job, to hang on to that. It will protect you. It will take care of you."

In total, there were 19 people who reported before the commission to speak.

### THE COMMISSIONERS DECIDE

Lee spoke for about 10 minutes in support of the ordinance and said that for decades, politicians have campaigned on the empty promises of jobs and business development.

He cited a film tax credit bill offered by legislators at the Roundhouse in Santa Fe as an

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example of a seemingly good idea that sunk because of legislative riders and amendments to the bill.

“Once again, providing cover for each other while abandoning good ideas and pushing down policy that is bad for all local governments. 65 percent of our state supports right-to-work,” Lee said.

Lee said states that adopted right-to-work laws have seen growth in the form of economic development, jobs, and urban expansion.

“If this ordinance meant the end of unions, there is no way I would even begin to consider its adoption,” he said.

Commissioner Carol Bowman-Muskett said she listened to everyone and evaluated her decision carefully.

“I took a survey on how many of our locals were for and against,” she said. “Those are the ones that I really paid attention to. 20 percent of our locals were for and about 70 percent were against. Those are the ones that we need to listen to.”

Jackson spoke last and began by identifying herself as Native American and a person of color.

“I reached this point in my life where I have experienced many things,” she said. “I’ve worked in the cities, I’ve worked in the rural areas, and I’ve worked for the Navajo Nation.”

In town, Wal-Mart is paying minimum wage to people, she said.

“People want to buy a house, people want to buy a car, but they can’t because they’re making

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minimum wage. I see people being threatened when they make a stand against conditions in the workplace,” Jackson said.

She reiterated three points made by a citizen who opposed the ordinance: the county lacks a qualified workforce, training opportunities, and has a high rate of addiction.

“Why? Because there’s a lack of jobs and most of us are people of color,” Jackson said. “I’m addressing the elephant in the room because I am that person. It affects me, it affects my people, my children, and grandchildren.”

Before she could call for the vote, a second to the motion was needed. The room was silent. Nobody seconded the measure.

“There is no second to this motion. So it dies for lack of a second,” she said, concluding the discussion, and ending the proposed ordinance.

By Rick Abasta

For the Sun