

Platte Chat

*An ongoing conversation about how to best preserve free enterprise,
personal responsibility and limited government in Nebraska*



CIR "Reform" Thoughts

by John S. McCollister

Nebraska taxpayers and their elected representatives deserve the right to decide how much government they can support with their tax dollars. The voices of taxpayers in rural and urban areas alike have been continually silenced for decades by the mandates of a handful of unelected lawyers known as the Commission of Industrial Relations or "CIR." State law empowers this group to determine the wages and benefits paid to most public employees in Nebraska. The mandates handed down by the CIR over the past sixty years have slowly eroded the ability of elected officials to control the ballooning costs of labor and have created our current climate where local governments are in a race to insolvency. Now, when both government and household budgets are stretched thin, another group of lawyers are intent on reforming this little understood and complex law by making it more complex.

Nebraska's unicameral legislature is a unique institution that relies on, and indeed requires, all legislative bills be afforded a public hearing where any citizen may voice their respective opinion. Last month, the transparency and accountability inherent in this process was subverted by the Chairman of the Business and Labor Committee, Senator Steve Lathrop. Senator Lathrop introduced a bill, LB 397, which he called a shell for legislation that had yet to be negotiated by the interested parties - labor lawyers - behind closed doors. During that hearing, no person apart from the select few from this so-called working group was allowed the opportunity to comment on Senator Lathrop's bill. Since that hearing, none of the eight other legitimate proposals for reform to the CIR have been allowed to advance from Lathrop's committee for debate by the Legislature.

Tuesday afternoon, all but one of the state senators on Senator Lathrop's committee voted to advance a sixty-seven page amendment which, given the timing of the release of the amendment and the vote, it is questionable if all members of the committee even read. Senator Lathrop and the members of his closed door group seem to have succeeded thus far in selling some lawmakers on the idea that this proposal is the panacea for all ills wrought by the CIR. Lathrop's bill conflates the need to appease the disparate interests of labor unions, municipalities, counties, and schools with the basic interest of taxpayers to have better control over their money. Not all compromises benefit the common good, and this compromise appears to have missed the mark for the kind of meaningful reform called for by the taxpayers of this state.

Meaningful CIR reform must not allow government to pick the winners and losers in labor disputes but must comprehensively apply the same rules to all units of government. Lathrop's proposal allows school districts to request a special hearing when the district does not have the ability to pay for the CIR's mandated increases, however, cities and counties are not given this

opportunity under Lathrop's proposal. Meaningful CIR reform must be comprehensible to Nebraska taxpayers. Lathrop's proposal squanders an opportunity to simplify the process and instead adds additional regulation and further empowers the CIR. Lathrop's compromise has not adequately taken into account the interest of the Nebraska taxpayer and thus is not the most appropriate resolution of the CIR issue.

Nebraskans have a unique opportunity to corral government spending and lessen their tax burden, without the animosity seen in Wisconsin and other states, by encouraging the passage of real CIR reform this legislative session. Lathrop's proposal does nothing to lessen the authority of the CIR to substitute their decisions for that of local representatives. No longer should the Nebraska taxpayer be denied the right to decide how much government they can afford.

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