

Senate Passes Collective Bargaining Reforms; House Declines, But Labor Gets Message

by Christine Stuart and Hugh McQuaid | Jun 30, 2011 10:08pm CT News Junkie

The Senate tackled [changes](#) to collective bargaining and passed the bill 30 to 6 shortly after 8:30 p.m. Thursday, while the House debated a [bill](#) that gives Gov. Dannel P. Malloy increased rescission authority.

House Speaker Chris Donovan, D-Meriden, made it clear earlier in the evening that the House would not take up the collective bargaining changes being debated by the Senate.

“We’re not debating that today,” Donovan said. “That doesn’t mean we won’t bring it up if the deal doesn’t go through.”

He said the collective bargaining bill will remain on the House agenda and can be taken up in the future if the State Employees Bargaining Agent Coalition can’t reach an agreement on the \$1.6 billion concession package. And despite SEBAC’s inability to delineate a clear path forward, Donovan remained optimistic.

“If there is no agreement we may be dealing with these issues. So right now we are concentrating on dealing with the budget issue. That’s why we came in,” Donovan said.

A staunch supporter of labor, Donovan said he hopes state employees will take notice that the item is remaining on the House calendar.

Asked whether the unions are bothered by that fact, Matt O’Connor, SEBAC spokesman, said “we’re confident we’re going to reach a resolution.”

But that’s not to say the unions don’t take seriously the legislation the Senate passed Thursday.

“It’s a real fiscal problem, but the last thing we need to do is make permanent changes that have real implications for the quality of life in Connecticut,” O’Connor said.

O’Connor remained confident SEBAC would reach an agreement on the concession package even though under its current rules the vote could not be ratified.

“Chances are good that it passes,” O’Connor said. “How we get there I really don’t know.”

Republican lawmakers said the support by some Democrats to change how pension benefits are calculated was “for show.”

“With respect to changes to collective bargaining, it’s all a show,” Sen. Minority Leader John McKinney, R-Fairfield, said. “There is no intention of passing that legislation. It’s just about showing that they’re tough when in fact they really aren’t.”

“The voices of all of our constituents have been silenced by the willingness of Democratic leadership to give all of this power to Governor Malloy,” McKinney said.

The Senate spent several hours on the bill, which they acknowledged was largely symbolic.

The bill focused on eliminating longevity payments for state employees not yet eligible for them and freezing longevity payments for those already receiving them. The longevity changes could be made to union contracts as they come up for renewal, but the pension benefits would not be changed until 2017, the expiration of the SEBAC agreement.

The bill also would have changed the definition of “salary” for pension calculations in order to exclude overtime, longevity, fees or any other payment in the calculation.

It passed with broad support on both sides of the aisle after a debate marked by uncommon agreement.

“Albeit [the bill was] symbolic perhaps and not real because it won’t be taken up in the House, it is an important one nonetheless. It is a sign for the first time in my 13 years that as Democrats and Republicans we agree on making some long-term structural changes,” McKinney said.

McKinney said that in passing the bill, the chamber set the state on a very different path. He hoped the House would someday soon take up the measure, he said.

Senate President Donald Williams said even that if the House never takes up the measure, it wasn’t pointless. He compared it to amendments submitted by Senate Republicans all the time.

“We know that those amendments rarely have a chance of passage and becoming law. However, you bring those forward to send a message. You bring those forward to present your ideas so that perhaps – not today – but perhaps tomorrow, next week or next year, they resonate,” he said.

If the bipartisan consent seemed unusual so did the points of contention.

Early in the debate, observers scratched their heads as they watched Enfield Republican Sen. John Kissel defend longevity payments for some state workers while the traditionally pro-union Sen. Edith Prague, D-Columbia, called for their end.

Prague said people should have the ability to negotiate good salaries, good pensions, and good health care benefits.

“I don’t believe people should get paid longevity for working 10 years just because people stayed in a good job,” she said.

Sen. Leonard Fasano of North Haven was one of two Republicans to vote against the bill. He said it was starting to seem likely that the unions would find a way to ratify an agreement and the bill only existed as something to hold over their heads.

“This is just hanging in the House to make sure the deal goes through and no structural changes that this body, this Senate bipartisan says they want – it’s not going to happen and I as a legislator refuse to vote for a bill that’s going to die as soon as it leaves that clerk’s desk,” he said.