



Legislative UPDATE



A weekly report from the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO

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Bills Swap Sides-The Debates Continue

The total eclipse of the moon coincided with the final cut off for House of Origin bills last week but Labor did see a few rays of light peeking through. We had several bills pass out of both the House and Senate and now they are on the way to the opposite house for hearings and hopefully final passage.

From the Senate:

The CWA was able to get their **High Speed Internet bill (6438)** passed through the Senate with a vote of 49 to zero. This bill lays the groundwork for the expansion of high-speed internet service throughout the state. It is a great opportunity to create jobs in both urban and rural areas and begins to bridge the digital divide. It now moves on to the House with a hearing scheduled in the House Communication, Technology and Energy Committee on February 26 at 10 a.m.

The Building Trades and Laborers won victory in the Senate with the **Underground Economy bill (SB 6732)** which will bring labor and business together to start the process of going after individuals who are not abiding by the state employment laws. It is a win/win that will help stabilize wages and boost revenues from employment taxes. The House had its first public hearing in Commerce & Labor this week.

The Sheet Metal Workers, IBEW and the Pipefitters were fighting hard to pass the **HVAC bill (SB 5831)** which, in its original form, would have required certification for mechanics performing heating, ventilating, air condition, refrigeration and gas piping work. The Senate passed a version setting up another task force to study the problem more. The hope is that a version will emerge from the House that will not be a study but actual implementation of this necessary safety and consumer protection issue.

An important correction to legislation passed in 2003 will restore **unemployment benefits** to workers who have left a job to enter an apprenticeship program. The Senate passed **SB 6751** to ensure these workers who are taking a risk to better their skills still get necessary compensation while they are in training. The House should follow suit as it is a good way to level the playing field and open up apprenticeships to more workers.

WFSE battled and won in the Senate to expand **whistleblower protection (SB 6776)**. This bill is about government accountability and protection for any employee who finds themselves in the unfortunate position of having to expose any kind of corruption or illegal behavior in the workplace. The House

has scheduled a hearing in the Committee on State Government and Tribal Affairs at 10 a.m. on February 26th.

From the House:

IBEW had a win in the House with **HB 2203** which ensures that operating and maintenance **employees working at nuclear power plants** who are covered under collective bargaining have rights to **binding arbitration**. The Senate will now consider after hearings that were held this week in Labor, Commerce and Research & Development.

The House voted to **add labor members to two boards: the Transit Board (HB 2216) and the Forest Protection Board (HB 2893)**. The Amalgamated Transit Union testified in support of ensuring that the transit system has at least a voice for workers who run the day to day operations of the system. While it is a non-voting member this bill at least gives the workers a chance to speak to issues that will help increase the efficiency of the system.

The fight to add a labor member on the Forest Protection Board has been long and hard. The Board has operated since

Bills Moving from the Senate to the House

SB 5261	Insurance Comm. Rate	<i>Senate vote 31/18</i>
SB 5831	HVAC	<i>Senate vote 47/2</i>
SB 6241	Prescription Privacy	<i>Senate vote 26/22</i>
SB 6333	Health Working Group	<i>Senate vote 31/17</i>
SB 6438	High Speed Internet	<i>Senate vote 49/0</i>
SB 6732	Underground Economy	<i>Senate vote 48/0</i>
SB 6751	UI for Apprentices	<i>Senate vote 35/13</i>
SB 6776	Whistleblower	<i>Senate vote 48/0</i>
SB 6809	Working Families Credit	<i>Senate vote 32/16</i>

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Bills Moving from the House to the Senate

HB 2203	Interests Arbitration Energy NW	<i>House vote 68/34</i>
HB 2216	Labor Member Transit Board	<i>House vote 63/33</i>
HB 2699	Service Charge Disclosure	<i>House vote 70/25</i>
HB 2815	Climate & Green Jobs	<i>House vote 64/31</i>
HB 2893	Labor Member Forest Board	<i>House vote 90/4</i>
HB 2963	Bargaining for TA's @ WSU	<i>House vote 62/32</i>
HB 3121	Underground Economy	<i>House vote 92/2</i>
HB 3122	Independent Contractor Test	<i>House vote 92/2</i>
HB 3139	Benefits on Appeal	<i>House vote 62/32</i>
HB 3145	Bargaining for Sp. Foster Parents	<i>House vote 72/22</i>

1974 without a voice from the ground floor. The House vote recognizes that it is about time to include worker representation; let's hope this sentiment prevails in the Senate. A hearing is scheduled in the Committee on Natural Resources and Ocean & Recreation at 8 a.m. on February 27th.

The earth and its inhabitants won with the House passage of the **Climate Action and Green Jobs bill (2815)**. It is a comprehensive bill that will set emissions standards and reporting but more importantly for labor, it will create jobs and develop workforce training for clean energy jobs. There is sure to be a lot of interest as the Senate considers this bill.

Foster parents who take care of children with physical and mental challenges will get the right to collective bargaining according to **HB 3145**. The bill creates structure, standards and accountability within the system.

HB 2963 extends the same collective bargaining rights granted to University of Washington teaching assistants to those at Washington State University. It has worked at UW and now the House agrees that WSU academic student employees deserve the same. The Senate Labor, Commerce and Research & Development committee will hear the bill on February 25th at 10 a.m.

Low Wage Working Families Win a Break

The Senate passed the Working Families Credit by a vote of 32-16 – a tax cut for lower wage working families who pay a disproportionate share of household income in taxes based on the federal Earned Income Tax Credit. Now your help is needed to put this program over the top. SSB 6809 has been assigned to House Finance Committee, where the House version

was reported out as a study-only bill the last time around. (We don't need to study a program that 23 other states already have that is associated with a long-standing and successful federal EITC -- we need help for working families, economic stimulus and a fairer tax system!)

Monday March 3 is the cutoff date for fiscal committees to move opposite house bills. The Washington Tax Fairness Coalition is asking you to call Democratic members of the Finance Committee (Hunter-Chair, Hasegawa-Vice Chair, Conway, Ericks, Santos and McIntire) as well as Speaker Chopp and Majority Leader Lynn Kessler -- and urge them to report out the version of the Working Families Credit passed by every Democratic member of the Senate -- which actually creates the Working Families Credit program.

Health Care in Feverish Battle

Prescription Privacy came out of the Senate with a vote of 26 to 22. The grass-roots lobbying of the Healthy Washington Coalition paid off but the battle was pitched to the end. The sheer numbers of pharmaceutical lobbyists dwarfed the coalition's efforts but the argument to protect the doctor/patient relationship and shore up consumer protections prevailed; pharmaceutical profit-making for once, took a backseat.

The battle begins today in the House. Prescription Privacy will be heard in the Health Care & Wellness Committee at 3:30 pm.

At that same time the committee will hear SB 6333, the bill to create a working group to study specific health care plans to create quality, affordable coverage for all Washingtonians and creates a public process through which Washington residents can discuss the kind of health care system we want to create.

The Health Insurance Partnership bill (HB 2537) will be heard in the Senate Health Care committee tomorrow. This is a bill that is critical to employees of small businesses in our state as it gives them a vehicle for getting health care coverage.

Benefits for injured workers survive

In the face of hollow sounding arguments from the state's largest corporations, the House overwhelmingly approved (62/32) the Benefits on Appeal bill (HB 3139) safeguarding an injured worker's benefits during a disputed claim by a self insured employer. Morally this was the right thing to do. Any delay in benefits while a worker is injured not only complicates the treatment process but it puts the worker in an untenable situation – not being able to work and not being able to pay bills.

It is important to understand that these are not new or additional benefits but merely benefits that the Department of Labor and Industries has determined is warranted by the facts of the claim. The bill allows for an expedited review at the Board of Appeals which, should the decision be reversed, would lower the exposure to both worker and self-insured company. Bear in mind, a self-insured company's exposure is miniscule relative to an injured worker not being paid the time-loss owed them or being given the medical treatment needed.

The Senate Committee on Labor, Commerce, and Research & Development will hear the bill on February 26th at 1:30 p.m.