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Jobless bill backed by coalition; hearing sought

Mannix Porterfield
Register-Herald Reporter

CHARLESTON — Rick Wilson held aloft a fiddle Monday, recalling the legend of Nero playing while Rome burned.

Actually, there were no violins in A.D. 64 when the deranged emperor allowed the ancient city to go up in flames.

That was not the point, said Wilson, director of the American Friends Service Committee of the West Virginia Economic Justice Project.

“Something is burning, and this is no time to fiddle around,” the former volunteer firefighter declared in support of Gov. Joe Manchin’s bill to shore up the struggling unemployment fund.

Wilson gathered a coalition of labor, advocacy groups, clergy and the NAACP to endorse SB246, now in the hands of the House of Delegates. The measure has incurred strong criticism by the state Chamber of Commerce on grounds it would hurt West Virginia businesses.

Since last year, Wilson noted, the jobless rate in West Virginia has soared from 4.3 percent to 7.5 percent, “and we haven’t hit bottom yet.”

“More and more families are being hit by this,” Wilson said. “More and more people are being hurt. This is no time to be fiddling around. We need to put out this fire.”

Before the session ends Saturday, however, the House of Delegates is likely to do much fiddling with the bill.

Judiciary members took it up Monday, and from there, House Minority Leader Tim Armstead, R-Kanawha, wants to see a public hearing when it reaches the finance committee.

That panel’s former chairman, Delegate Harold Michael, D-Hardy, dislikes the governor’s proposal to impose surcharges on employers and workers alike to help stabilize the fund.

Michael said he wants to see some alternative financing methods explored before the bill is sent to Manchin’s desk.

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Manchin also is seeking to move the taxable threshold of wages when employers pay from \$8,000 to \$12,000. That would fall back to \$10,000 once the fund is stable under the proposed new legislation.

The idea is to keep the fund from falling below \$180 million, and preferably kept near the \$220 million level.

In recent weeks, more storm clouds have gathered. Manchin was forced to downsize revenue estimates by \$200 million and impose a hiring freeze in state government.

Wilson and others at a news conference see a sense of urgency in putting the fund on solid footing.

"Labor's concern is that some in the business community have totally forgotten the lessons learned from the Great Depression of the last century," he said. "The business community will never find a good time to properly fund the unemployment compensation program," he said.

If the Legislature fails on this bill, predicted Paul Miller, representing the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy, the fund will go belly up by the third quarter of next year.

"It's not a matter of if; it's a matter of when," he added.

Angie Rosser, representing the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence, said the Senate bill would have a positive effect on victims she represents.

Violence haunts victims in the work place, exposing them to abuse, harassment, and terrorism, Rosser said.

She suggested one reform providing temporary assistance for anyone forced out of the work site by a stalker or abuser.

The Rev. James Patterson of the Institute Church of the Nazarene told reporters that "a great deal of people in my community" hold part-time jobs.

"This legislation and subsequent reforms should allow these people to have some safety nets and funds that see their families and children through this economic downturn that we're facing," the pastor added.



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