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Labor leaders say politics necessary to protect workers

By [Paul J. Nyden](#)

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Political activity is a key to protecting the rights of workers in any state, labor leaders said Wednesday during the West Virginia AFL-CIO's annual legislative conference.

Tim Burga, president of the Ohio AFL-CIO, spoke about his group's role in defeating legislative attempts last year to weaken the power of unions that represent public workers.

On Nov. 8, Ohio voters overturned a state law, backed by Republicans and Gov. John Kasich, that would have eliminated collective-bargaining rights for state employees.

Burga and Ohio AFL-CIO members helped collect 1.3 million signatures to put that resolution on the November ballot.

"When we have a chance to talk about our issues, we win," Burga told about 200 people at Wednesday's event at the Charleston Civic Center.

The AFL-CIO conference also featured a panel about Marcellus Shale, including Steve White, executive director of the Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation, and Ted Boettner, executive director of the West Virginia Center on Budget & Policy.

Predicting Marcellus Shale will have a major economic impact, Boettner and White both urged political leaders to make sure its extraction will help West Virginians.

On Monday, the Center on Budget & Policy released a new report -- "Creating an Economic Diversification Fund: Turning Nonrenewable Natural Resources into Sustainable Wealth for West Virginia" -- advocating the use severance taxes to create a trust fund.

"How can we make sure that Marcellus Shale benefits working people and future generations?" Boettner asked.

The center's report advocates creating a trust fund by assessing more severance taxes on natural gas.

"In 2000, there were \$20 million in severance taxes. Now, we have \$80 million in severance taxes. That could reach \$325 million to \$900 million in the next 25 years," Boettner said. "If we had assessed a 1 percent severance tax on coal in 1980 to put into a trust fund, we could have had \$3 billion in that fund today."

White focused on the need to look out for the interests of local workers and communities in extracting natural gas from Marcellus Shale and Utica Shale reserves in West Virginia and Ohio -- reserves that are the largest in the country.

"We are getting a lot of work," White said. "Today, there are between 4,000 and 6,000 jobs. We are doing about half of that.

"For whatever reason, many companies would rather bring their folks in from Texas or Oklahoma. When you drive by a hotel or motel, they are chock full with workers from other states. You can't get a room."

White focused on Dominion Resources, based in Richmond, Va.

"Dominion is building a \$500 million facility in Martinsburg to separate other gases from natural gas [from Marcellus Shale deposits], including ethane, butane and propane.

"We are upset at Dominion. No one local contractor could bid on their project. And they don't like unions," White said.

Jobs for Local Workers, based in Charleston, is urging people to sign a petition called "The Marcellus Principles."

The petition urges hiring of local workers for all industry jobs and requiring companies "to be responsible stewards of the land where natural gas is extracted, processed and delivered."

At least 10 county commissions in West Virginia, White said, have already adopted similar resolutions.

Kenney Perdue, president of the state AFL-CIO, and other union leaders urged the Legislature to pass laws including the "Keep Jobs in West Virginia Act." That act would prohibit awarding state contracts to vendors who pay for work performed outside of West Virginia.

Ted Hapney, chief lobbyist of the United Mine Workers, said his union strongly supports existing state laws for drug testing.

"None of our miners want to work next to anyone who is high or intoxicated," Hapney said. "Every one of our guys is drug tested or has the potential to be tested."

Hapney urged legislators to expand that law to include superintendents, security guards and other coal company employees who are now exempt from those tests.

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