

Bargaining bill veto shakes up Iowa's political landscape

By Dan Gearino | Thursday, May 15, 2008

DES MOINES — Gov. Chet Culver turned Iowa's partisan landscape on its ear this week with his veto of a bill that would have given public-employee unions greater power in contract negotiations.

The governor is being praised by Republicans and raked by many of his fellow Democrats. Both sides agree on at least one thing: The veto has changed the playing field for the 2008 legislative elections and the 2010 election for governor.

Ken Sagar, president of the Iowa Federation of Labor AFL-CIO, was stunned by the veto, which was announced Wednesday. He viewed the bill as a minor change that would have put public-employee unions on a level playing field with employers.

"I think we heard in fairly deafening terms yesterday where we lie in the big picture of things," he said.

The measure would have expanded the scope of topics that can be part of contract negotiations, allowing unions to bargain on such issues as uniforms and class size.

Sagar said the veto underscores his nagging feeling that elected Democrats have not done enough to help workers over the past two years. This is despite Democrats holding control of the governor's office and both chambers of the Legislature for the first time since the mid-1960s.

"Clearly, I don't have an explanation for why we haven't been able to move working people's agenda forward," Sagar said.

Culver was forced to choose between the interests of unions and the interests of public employers. And some of those public employers are also Democrats, such as Davenport Mayor Bill Gluba.

"The governor showed a lot of courage, leadership and statesmanship in vetoing that bill," Gluba said.

"He showed he's the governor, and AFSCME (the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) is not running the [state of Iowa](#), contrary to what they think, nor do the teachers," he said.

He thinks union leaders made a mistake by trying to ram the bill through the Legislature, rather than working on a compromise that local governments could live with.

Gluba was one of many local government officials who warned Culver the bill may lead to big increases in labor costs, which may lead to higher property taxes. Culver cited that concern as one of the reasons for the veto.

Now with the veto, Gluba hopes labor leaders and Democratic elected officials can overcome hard feelings and work together on other issues. For instance, he said he hopes the Legislature will one day pass fair share, a proposal that would let unions negotiate for the right to charge a fee for representing nonunion workers.

The bottom line, Gluba said, is that organized labor and the Democratic Party need each other and agree on nearly every issue.

Republicans greeted the veto with a level of praise that might make observers forget Culver is a Democrat. GOP leaders say Culver will be more difficult to beat in 2010 because he has now insulated himself from the charge that he is controlled by his party's interest groups.

"The cynic in me may ask how much of this is smoke and mirrors," said Bob Vander Plaats of Sioux City, the Republican nominee for lieutenant governor in 2006 and a possible candidate for governor in 2010.

Vander Plaats thinks Culver did the right thing, but he also suspects the veto was a political calculation, intended to improve the governor's standing with moderate voters.

"I believe it is to set him up for a 2010 run, to say, 'Hey, I'm not that bad,'" Vander Plaats said.

But Culver's veto may cause him plenty of headaches before the 2010 election. He has angered legislative leaders from his own party, and he needs the help of those leaders to pass his agenda over the next two years.

Sen. Bill Dotzler, D-Waterloo, one of the top legislators on labor issues, said he won't let his disappointment about the veto affect his thinking on other issues. He hopes his fellow Democrats agree.

"I believe you shouldn't let the outcome on one bill affect another bill," he said.

One added wrinkle from the situation is how the veto will affect this year's legislative elections. Nearly all House and Senate Democrats voted for the collective bargaining bill, and now they will have to defend themselves against the charge that they supported a bill that a governor from their own party refused to sign.

Gluba, a former state legislator, said ramifications for legislative races are one of the most unfortunate aspects of what happened. He said legislative leaders are to blame for debating the bill before they knew that the governor would support it.

"I'd say they blew it," Gluba said.

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