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Union leader says lawmakers' education cuts, Medicaid changes 'immoral'

by Mark Pattison by Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON -- The secretary-treasurer of the Texas AFL-CIO said lawmakers in his home state last year conducted "the most immoral legislative session I have ever witnessed," especially their actions on education funding and Medicaid.

John Patrick, a Catholic, also criticized lawmakers for trying to pass a measure that he said would have made it illegal for labor officials to use union dues to "advocate for working families."

But he reserved his greatest scorn for budget cuts.

"In 2011, the Texas Legislature took \$4 billion out of public schools. Instead of investing in our future, Texas lawmakers divested from the future," he said. "Instead of helping the poorest among us, Texas lawmakers wrote billions of dollars in IOUs for Medicaid."

The cuts were part of a two-year budget the Republican-controlled Legislature passed last May. School districts had to lay off about 32,000 school employees, including 12,000 teachers. Democratic lawmakers and the Texas State Teachers Association have asked the Gov. Rick Perry to call a special session to resolve the crisis.

Patrick noted that the state Legislature meets for only 140 days every two years, so the regular session will not convene until 2013.

Last year, Texas lawmakers also voted to shift Medicaid care to a managed-care system. Supporters of the move said it would cut costs, but opponents said it would just reduce services for the poor and elderly.

Patrick spent most of his time on state legislation that targeted unions.

"In Texas, a bill was introduced early in last year's session that sponsors called 'Paycheck Protection.' Those of us in the labor movement called it 'Paycheck Deception,'" he said.

"This legislation would have made it a crime for me to use union dues money to stand before you today as an advocate for working families," Patrick added. "The measure would have required unions to set up new accounting systems just to publish our views.

"It would have affected public- and private-sector workers alike, barring public employees, for example, from voluntarily deducting union dues from their paychecks. In short, it was an effort to make the operation of a union in Texas as miserable an endeavor as possible."

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Patrick said the measure did not pass because unions rose up against the bill and with the 140-day legislative session lawmakers spent much of their time on a voter-ID bill and on redistricting; the latter issue is still tied up in the courts, preventing Texas from even scheduling a primary election date.

Patrick called what happened in Texas part of "a national pattern of attacks on public service workers."

He cited Wisconsin, Ohio and Arizona. In Wisconsin, Republican Gov. Scott Walker's efforts to reduce government spending led to passage of a law that took away collective bargaining rights for most public employees and led to huge demonstrations at the state capitol in Madison. A flurry of recall elections followed, and the next wave may include Walker.

In Ohio, a bill attacking worker rights was repealed by voters in a November referendum; and the Arizona Legislature is considering a ban on union bargaining rights and payroll deduction of union dues.

"The list of states attacking public workers grows longer with each passing day," Patrick said.

He bemoaned the existence in states of new legislative majorities, which he said "began targeted efforts to weaken the position of teachers, firefighters, nurses and police. These are the same individuals who are protecting our streets and who are an indispensable part of our nation's infrastructure."

"We are in an era in which some of the loudest voices would like to bring us back to the way workers were treated in the 19th century," Patrick said. "Back then, employment was known in courts of law as a 'master-servant' relationship. As religious leaders and activists, you know that there is only one real master in this world, and it isn't the person who is signing your paycheck."

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