

House OKs strike bill

By LYNN ORR

After five months of pressurized legislating, state public employees reached the half-way point in their fight for the legal right to strike.

The State House passed the controversial bill, Public Act 454, by a 68-33 margin in a marathon Tuesday session characterized as "zooish" by one observer.

The bill, as passed by the House, would regulate the right to strike of public employees, excluding police and firefighters, with 10 days notice to the employer.

It and more than 100 amendments also would provide for the right to petition for an injunction to stop the strike on the part of public employers; and a provision to allow the Michigan Employment Relations Commission (MERC) to order arbitration if a dispute cannot be solved.

THE SECOND stage in the battle most likely will see the Michigan Association of School Boards (MASB) carrying the opposition flag into the Senate labor committee headed by State Sen. David Plawewski, D-Deerborn Heights, prior to the bill's introduction to the Senate floor.

The bill, itself an amendment to the 1965 law governing collective bargaining for public employees, was sponsored by State Rep. Perry Bullard, D-Ann Arbor.

Of the many amendments added to the bill in the final days of House action, the "binding arbitration" amendment proposed by Rep. Mary Brown, D-Kalamazoo, was approved, along with an equally controversial amendment proposed at the last minute by Jelt Sietsma, D-Grand Rapids.

Sietsma's amendment would prohibit an arbitrator from making an award that would cause layoffs or necessitate millage increases.

"If the bill went to Milliken now, we'd have to support a veto," said Darrell Tennis, labor representative of the Michigan AFL-CIO.

Calling Sietsma's last-minute item a "frustration amendment," Tennis said, "It marred an otherwise good package."

The bill's proponents, including the Michigan Education Association, the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), and the AFL-CIO most likely will work to eliminate the Sietsma amendment from the Senate version of the bill, Tennis predicted.

AL GAISS, director of United Service to Teachers in Wayne County, termed the bill one of the four major pieces of teacher legislation in the last 15 years.

"It will bring balance to the tables," he said. "We couldn't achieve it until labor got its act together," he added, referring to the many groups lobbying for the bill.

But the arbitration amendment and the role of unionized supervisors are two motives for opposition from the Michigan Municipal League, which led the fight in the House.

Director Bill Davis believes the right to strike must go hand-in-hand with rules comparable to those in private industry.

For example, Davis said, supervisors who are either in the same union or another union should be restricted in joining rank-and-file strikes.

"I think this bill will lead to more strikes and longer strikes," he said.

Binding arbitration would be the most significant change in the law, Davis added. He believes the bill as currently written would hamstring public employers, particularly school districts, in attempting to petition to a judge to prevent or stop a strike.

Only if the strike will sustain irreparable harm to the public's health can a judge enjoin a union's strike under the bill's current provisions, he said.

While conceding that public employees such as sewage treatment plant workers could be forced back to work under this provision, he added, "There's no way a judge could order the teachers back to work."

AREA STATE representatives voting for the bill were John Bennett, D-Redford; Joe Forbes, D-Oak Park, Southfield; Roy Smith, R-Ypsilanti, including Plymouth and Canton Township; and Alice Tomblin, D-Rochester.

Voting against the bill were Wilbur Brotherton, R-Farmington; James Defebaugh, R-Birmingham; Richard Fessler, R-West Bloomfield; William Keith, D-Garden City; Jack Kirksey, R-Livonia; Sal Rocca, D-Sterling Heights, including Troy.

Tom Brown, D-Westland; Robert Law, R-Livonia; and Ruth McNamee, R-Birmingham did not vote.

Choo-Choo

Elijah McCoy, one of Michigan's pioneer black inventors, began his career as a railroad engineer. A resident of Detroit, McCoy took out his first patent July 23, 1872 and obtained more than 52 between 1872 and 1915. One of his later inventions, the graphite lubricator, is believed to have saved seven minutes for each 100 miles of railroad locomotive travel, according to the travel bureau, Michigan Department of Commerce.

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