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By IKE MGBATOGU

Contributing Writer

COLUMBUS – Last week, Governor John Kasich signed the controversial Senate Bill 5 into law as he said he would, severely weakening Ohio's collective bargaining law that protects more than 360,000 public sector workers in the state.

The governor signed the bill into law after the Ohio House and Ohio Senate approved the agreed version of the bill Wednesday, the House by a 53-44 vote and the Senate by a 17-16 vote.

The drastically overhauled bill strips public workers of their rights, including the right to strike against government. Public workers would now be required to pay at least 15 percent of their health insurance cost. A wide panoply of issues (such as wages, grievance process, step increases, seniority, time-off, and others) previously negotiated between unions and government would no longer be decided that way. Binding arbitration is gone.

James Brudney, a labor law professor at Ohio State University, has an interesting take on this. With collective 'bargaining gone,' he calls what's left "collective begging" on the part of public workers because "the conversation ends whenever an employer decides that it ends."

It is a devastating punch in the guts of public workers. The bill passed despite a ferocious fight waged by a coalition of Democrats, labor unions and progressive groups to derail it. But, if you think for one New York second the fight is over and that the opponents of this measure should just pack up and go home, think again.

While the battle was lost on the legislative front, opponents of the bill plan to take their case to the people of Ohio by placing the issue on the November ballot. A political action group called 'We Are Ohio' has already been formed to coordinate these efforts. The target for the group now is to collect 230,000 signatures within 90 days, which is the timeline that must be met to prevent the bill from going into effect without Ohioans approving it through statewide referendum.

An elated Kasich was uncharacteristically measured in his initial reaction.

"Both Bill [Batcheleder] and me and Tom Niehaus don't see this as a celebratory moment," Kasich told reporters Wednesday night. "There are a lot of people who are upset. We respect that."

But he maintained that the bill will help Ohio local governments cut cost.

"I think they're going to find out at the end of the day we'll have stronger communities. This is all part of a package to help them to deal with limited resources and to get us into a position to start growing jobs instead of losing jobs," said Kasich.

The morning before he signed the bill, Kasich fired off an email, calling the passage of the bill by the Ohio House and Senate "a victory for Ohio taxpayers" that will restore "the balance of power."

He took a swipe at union leaders.

“There is a reason that the union bosses opposed these changes, because it strips power from the union leaders and returns it to the taxpayers and workers,” Kasich’s email said. “But make no mistake, we are fighting to save Ohio and need your help.”

“The nation is watching us in Ohio and we will provide the leadership necessary to become a job-creating state and serve as a model for the rest of America.”

House Democratic Leader Armond Budish, who worried all along that his caucus lacked enough votes to kill the bill, disagreed.

“You should not be balancing the budget on the backs of working people. That’s what Senate Bill 5 does,” said a disappointed Budish.

Democrats control only 40 of the 99 seats in the Ohio House.

Budish assured Ohioans this much. “We’ll do the only thing we can do. We’ll fight like hell.”

As for the impact of Senate Bill 5 on African-Americans, it could hurt more than any other group. In a response to the passage of the bill, the Ohio Legislative Black Caucus released a statement stating that Blacks could bear the brunt of the pain inflicted by Senate Bill 5 since they are heavily employed in the public sector.

According to Policy Matters, “18 percent of working African Americans” and “20 percent” of Black women are employed by the government at all levels.

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