

U.S. House Republicans pass bill to gut overtime pay

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Brushing aside opposition from unions, women's groups, and civil rights groups, the Republican-controlled U.S. House of Representatives passed a bill May 8 that would allow private-sector employers to avoid paying overtime wages to employees working more than 40 hours per week if they offer their employees "comp" time off instead.

H.R. 1406, dubbed the "Working Families Flexibility Act," passed on a mostly party-line vote of 223-204, with three Democrats voting for, and eight Republicans voting against.

Congressional Republicans from the Pacific Northwest all supported the bill. Greg Walden of Oregon and Jamie Herrera Beutler of Washington were co-sponsors.

The measure has virtually no chance of passing the Democratic-controlled U.S. Senate, and the White House has already warned of a veto by President Barack Obama should the bill reach his desk.

The bill is part of an effort by House Majority Leader Eric Cantor (R-Va.), a Tea Party darling, to "re-brand" the Republican Party as more "family

friendly," after the GOP lost the women's vote in the 2012 election.

The family friendly labeling didn't fool 160 organizations, led by the National Employment Law Project, that signed a mass letter against H.R.1406. It also didn't fool the AFL-CIO and several unions that individually wrote letters opposing the bill.

"We are tired of being presented with false choices by Republicans and business," Jeff Johnson, president of the Washington State Labor Council told The Stand, a web newsletter. "What is the choice between hard-earned overtime pay and comp time at the discretion of the employer? This is really a Bosses' Flexibility Act."

The Stand noted that the rebranding effort is not about changing the party's priorities and values, "it's just about changing their talking points." An identical version of H.R. 1406 was introduced in 2003 (it died in committee), and replacing overtime pay with comp time has been a goal shared by Republicans and corporate lobbying groups like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce for decades.

"If Republicans are truly interested in family-friendly work policies and not just rebranding themselves as something they are not, then let's see their support for paid family leave, universal paid safe and sick leave, and universal paid vacation leave for all workers," Johnson said. "If they did these things then the rebranding exercise would be interesting."

In a letter to members of the U.S.

House, Charles Loveless, legislative director of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), wrote that federal law for state and local workers has the same provisions allowing flexibility — at employer discretion — as H.R.1406. But, he added, employers routinely abuse the flexibility rule. "In theory, employees may take compensatory time within a reasonable period after making the request," he wrote. "In practice, employees are denied the time when they really need it and the language of the law becomes a false premise."

Under H.R. 1406, employers would have flexibility to decide whether to allow employees to trade overtime hours for time off, and employers would have final say in providing time off to workers who have eschewed their overtime hours. The bill text states that time off would be permitted to an employee who has accrued time and put in a written request if the employer determines that "the use of the compensatory time does not unduly disrupt the operations of the employer."

MapLight, a nonpartisan research organization, followed the money, tracking campaign contributions to members of the U.S. House between Jan. 1, 2011 and Dec. 31, 2012, from

interest groups that had taken a public position on H.R. 1406.

MapLight found that House members voting for the bill received, on average, \$40,495 from groups supporting the bill (U.S. Chamber of Commerce, National Retail Federation, etc.) — 115 percent more than House members who voted against it.

Speaker John Boehner, who controls the House's legislative agenda, received more money from supporting groups than any other member of the House — \$409,098.

In the joint letter to Congress initiated by the National Employment Law Project, opponents of the bill wrote:

"H.R.1406 provides no guarantee that workers can use their earned time when a child falls ill, to attend a parent-teacher conference, or to help an aging parent settle in to a nursing home. Employers can veto an employee's request to use comp time even in cases of urgent need."

Signers included the AFL-CIO; the Coalition of Labor Union Women; American Federation of Government Employees; the National Consumers League; Steelworkers; AFSCME; the American Federation of Teachers; the Labor Council for Latin American Advancement; Working America; and the Service Employees.

Union letter carriers, electricians will march in Starlight Parade

This year's Portland Rose Festival Starlight Parade will have entries from two local unions.

International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) Local 48 will mark its 100th anniversary with an entry consisting of a union-logoed Chevy Volt electric car, a centennial banner, and 40 marchers wearing custom safety vests, hard hats, and battery powered light strings.

National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) Branch 82 will also take part; the local has had an entry in the Starlight Parade every year since 1988. This year, members will march wearing their letter carrier uniforms, plus costumes resembling the U.S. Postal Service's "forever stamps." Those in-

clude Elvis Presley, a bride and groom, Abraham Lincoln, Carmen Miranda, and Buzz Lightyear from the movie Toy Story.

For the unions, as with other participants, it's a chance to get exposure and generate good will. Officially known as Portland General Electric/SOLVE Starlight Parade, the event draws more than 250,000 spectators to downtown Portland, and is broadcast live from 9 to 11 p.m. on FOX 12 TV.

The parade will take place in downtown Portland Saturday, June 1, starting at 8:30 p.m. It's preceded by the Starlight Run, a 5k fun run.

To see the parade route, go online to: <http://www.rosefestival.org/events/starlightparade/SP-Route-Map.pdf>.



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