

Labor blames chamber

Union leader says ads blaming

court drive business out

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While the West Virginia Chamber of Commerce continues to run ads blaming the state Supreme Court, and by implication Justice Warren McGraw, for jobs the state has lost in the last few years, a labor union leader said the state business group should look at its own president.

Speaking at a United Mine Workers rally Tuesday, Jim Bowen, president of the West Virginia AFL-CIO, said constant badmouthing of the state by the chamber and its president, Steve Roberts, has kept businesses from moving into the state.

"The state Chamber of Commerce -- that's what's wrong with West Virginia," Bowen said.

Roberts, however, said the business community was just as critical two decades ago of the state's education system.

"Some could have said, 'Hey, you're being negative.' But the fact is that our shining the bright light on education inadequacies has led to some improvements," he said.

When he was growing up in West Virginia, similar business community complaints led the state and federal government to resume work on the state's interstate highway system and improve its secondary roads, Roberts added.

By putting the same focus on the state's court system, the chamber hopes to change what it sees as a major obstacle to economic development, he said.

Bowen, however, said the constant court bashing by Roberts only serves to scare prospective employers away.

"He's the biggest hindrance to economic development in our state," Bowen said.

McGraw, a labor-friendly judge, is up for re-election this year. During the primary, the chamber's ads didn't mention McGraw by name but said the current Supreme Court has driven thousands of jobs out of the state.

The chamber backed Greenbrier County Circuit Judge Jim Rowe as the Democratic nominee for the Supreme Court. McGraw won the nomination with 56 percent of the vote.

During the rally on Tuesday, Bowen congratulated union members on helping McGraw win the election.

"You don't know how much that means to the working people of the state," he said.

McGraw faces Republican nominee Brent Benjamin in the November general election.

Bowen said the Supreme Court was a "corporate" court that consistently ruled against workers about 15 years ago. Since then, the union has worked hard to convert it into "not a union court but a people's court," he said.

Every decision involving workers comes down to a 3-2 vote, he said.

"If we lose that seat in November, you can bet it will be 3-2 against the working people," Bowen said.

Roberts said Bowen's attack on the chamber is resorting to "name calling and finger pointing" in an attempt to influence the election.

"I would challenge him or anyone else to put forth their ideas about how to make West Virginia better," he said.

The chambers' ideas are available to the public on its Web site, Roberts said.

"What we hope is to have this conversation in West Virginia, with West Virginians about West Virginia," he said.

As for scaring off prospective employers, Roberts said he's merely reporting what those prospective employers are telling him when they decide not to come to the state.

"We are simply speaking for the people who make decisions about where jobs go," he said.  
"Unfortunately, in recent years, those decisions have not been positive, they have not been trending up."

Roberts said the union didn't attack the chamber when it previously highlighted problems with the schools or highways.

"I think what has changed is that labor unions are losing members because the kinds of companies that employ their members are no longer welcome in West Virginia," he said.

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