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NEA President: Attacks on teachers aren't about education

BOISE – Telling Idaho educators that he knows “what you have experienced since the election has shaken you to your core,” National Education Association President Dennis Van Roekel brought words of hope to more than 500 educators at the Idaho Education Association’s 119th Delegate Assembly.

Van Roekel railed against the way that powerful people are blaming educators and other employees for the nation’s economic woes. “The real reason we are in the bulls-eye is they realize what our strength is. You are in education because of the students we teach, and they know that,” he said.

Van Roekel said that the Luna legislation and similar attacks against workers in Wisconsin and other states “is not about education. What it’s about is political payback. It’s about wealthy CEOs who put themselves before country and put making money before everything else. It’s the wrong direction for America.”

Before Van Roekel spoke, IEA President Sherri Wood thanked lawmakers who opposed the Luna bills, and they received a standing ovation from the more than 500 delegates. Sen. Shawn Keough (R-Sandpoint) and Sen. Dean Cameron (R-Rupert) sent written messages of support, and several others spoke in person. “They are the heroes of the legislative session. We honor each and every one of them,” Wood said.

Sen. Edgar Malepeai (D-Pocatello) said educators’ support helped lawmakers get through a tough session. “Some of our political leaders are mean spirited and vindictive, but IEA and its leaders organized like never before,” he said. “It would be nice to be here today to celebrate the defeat of the Luna bills, but that victory is yet to come.”

Sen. Tim Corder (R-Mountain Home) urged delegates to prepare for a possibility of a future with the Luna laws. “You are responsible for the ones responsible for changing peoples’ minds one at a time. Work with the central committees of both parties to keep moderate-thinking people in and the nuts at both ends away.”

“You can hope in that referendum but you better darn well plan for the future without it. Don’t make the Republican Party say ‘I told you so’ twice without a plan to make them eat those words,” Corder added. “You choose how you plot your strategy moving forward. It better be a different union and a different strategy because what it was. wasn’t enough.”

Rep. Brian Cronin (D-Boise) read responses to his Facebook page where he asked “Who was your favorite teacher and why?” He said that speaking out against the Luna legislation came naturally to him as a father of grade school students. “What took courage was for you to speak out,” he told the educators.

“This ideologically motivated political plan is now the law, and it has shown that elections matter,” Cronin said. He noted that while he appreciates the referendum and recall efforts getting under way, “Let’s remember the best way to assure we don’t have to recall people and laws is to be sure such people never get elected in the first place.

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The Idaho Education Association is the state’s largest professional employee organization, representing 13,000 elementary and secondary teachers, education support professionals, school administrators, retired educators, and students preparing to become teachers.