

Going on strike

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

CHEERS ... to Rep. Caroline Troy, R-Genesee. Along with four of her fellow Republican Health and Welfare Committee members, Troy just served notice:

She's going on strike.

For the past three months, lawmakers have been dancing around the plight of 78,000 Idahoans who can't afford health insurance. They're supposed to get Medicaid coverage - virtually all of it paid by the federal government - but Idaho's GOP leadership has refused to approve it.

Instead, lawmakers have shut down hearings, buried bills and toyed with political gimmicks to make you think they're actually doing something.

No more.

Joined by Reps. Christy Perry, R-Nampa, and Kelley Packer, R-McCammon, Troy promised to block any bill, rule or measure that comes before the Health and Welfare Committee next year until the full House votes on a Medicaid expansion bill.

Two more Republicans - Reps. Paul Romrell of St. Anthony and Merrill Beyeler of Leador - indicated they'd follow suit.

Assuming the panel's two Democrats - Lewiston's John Rusche and Boise's Sue Chew - would join them, that's a solid majority of the panel.

"I chose to do something over nothing. I know those bills have caused much searching of the heart," Troy told the Spokesman-Review's Betsy Russell.

JEERS ... to state Rep. Shannon McMillan, R-Silverton. When it comes to funding Idaho's schools, McMillan is angling to become Public Enemy No. 1.

This year's plan to add \$109.5 million - or 7.4 percent - to school funding enjoyed broad support. But McMillan voted against six of the seven public school budget bills - making her hostility toward public education second only to state Rep. Vito Barbieri, R-Dalton Gardens, who voted against the entire package.

Reports the Tribune's William L. Spence, that's a repeat of her performance last year when McMillan also opposed six of seven school budgets.

When Spence asked why, she refused to say, just as she did last year.

Is McMillan so arrogant she won't answer?

Or so mentally foggy she can't?

JEERS ... to Idaho Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter. That was some veto message he delivered on the Legislature's plan to pre-empt Idahoans from deciding whether to increase the minimum wage within their communities.

It hit all the right notes:

- Idaho lawmakers rail against "absentee federal landlords (who) impose restrictions upon us." Now legislators are engaging in the same kind of behavior. "So I expect local jurisdictions to feel similarly when legislators decide overwhelmingly that they must not allow local voters to decide for themselves whether to raise the minimum wage."
- It's premature. When a minimum-wage initiative was floated in McCall last fall, voters turned it down. "Since isolated efforts to do so have gained little traction, I consider this bill to be a solution in search of a problem."
- Idaho is not an island. It borders Oregon and Washington, which have imposed their own minimum-wage laws. And forbidding Idaho's border communities from responding "could stifle local solutions."

There's just one thing wrong: Otter did not veto the bill. Instead, he shuffled off and allowed it to become law without his signature.

JEERS ... to Idaho Senate President Pro Tem Brent Hill, R-Rexburg, and House Speaker Scott Bedke, R-Oakley. Here they were pitching the idea of allocating another \$8 million to CenturyLink and Education Networks of America, two contractors from the defunct Idaho Education Network.

The two firms say they're owed money for services delivered before the courts declared the IEN contract voided.

That's because former Administration Director Mike Gwartney broke the rules and handed the IEN contract to them instead of the legitimate low bidder, Syringa Network.

Idaho Supreme Court Chief Justice Jim Jones used the word "corrupt" to describe those shenanigans. And in a unanimous opinion, the Idaho Supreme Court directed Gwartney's successor, Administration Director Robert Geddes, to claw back the \$29.7 million it paid the two IEN contracts under a bogus contract.

Idaho may need that money, too. The Federal Communications Commission may want Idaho to return the \$13.3 million in e-rate dollars it forked over to IEN.

At the very least, you would assume legislative leaders who are more sympathetic to taxpayers than well-connected corporations would hold off spending any more money.

JEERS ... to Washington state Rep. Matt Shea, R-Spokane Valley, as well as Idaho state Reps. Heather Scott, R-Blanchard, Sage Dixon, R-Ponderay, and Judy Boyle, R-Midvale.

Remember when they traveled to Burns, Ore., on Jan. 9 to meet with the Bundy gang holed up at Oregon's Malheur Wildlife Refuge?

Nobody asked them to show up.

In fact, according to Oregon Public Broadcasting, they were asked to leave.

OPB obtained a recording of a meeting in which Harney County Judge Steve Grasty plainly told Shea and the others their meddling could only make things worse.

In fact, Grasty said, state legislators from Washington and Idaho might only prolong the dispute by encouraging gang leader Ammon Bundy to continue the occupation.

Grasty was right.

The legislators went.

And the standoff continued for another three weeks.

JEERS ... to Rep. Rusche. How in the world does Idaho's senior elected Democrat end up doing the bidding of the radical gun lobby?

Rusche is the only Democrat in either the House or Senate who voted to allow Idahoans to carry concealed weapons without a permit.

That means no background checks.

No training.

No record of who may be packing a gun.

Cowered by the National Rifle Association and the Idaho Second Amendment Alliance, Idaho Republicans fell in line.

But why Rusche?

He tripped over his strategy. Uncertain where he stood when the bill came up, Rusche said he voted on the prevailing side so he could seek reconsideration later - a move the GOP majority later thwarted.

Either way, it puts Rusche formally on the wrong side. - M.T.