**7-232 members learn Wisconsin legislative issues and lobby elected officials in Madison**

**By Colin Campbell**

             Wage protection, equal pay, prison labor and mandatory overtime in health care jobs were the focus of the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO Legislative Conference and Lobby Day in Madison on April 24th and 25th.

            Vice President Colin Campbell, grievance representative Mike Merrill, and former Vice President Paul Mueller represented Local 7-232 in bringing these and other issues to the attention of Wisconsin's legislators.

            The Wage Protection Bill (Senate 17, Assembly 34) proposes to end the system of favoring banks and other secured creditors in a bankruptcy or plant closing. A system which often leaves little or nothing to satisfy worker's claims for wages not paid.

            In health care, mandatory overtime is not only a burden to workers, but also a threat to the safety of the patient as well. Too often, nurses and other health care workers are told, sometimes at the end of their shift, that they are required to stay and work another shift. The fatigue factor puts patients at risk, as it increases the potential for critical mistakes to be made by tired workers. Often, deliberate understaffing, mostly in hospitals, creates this situation. A bill is being introduced, with labor's support, to stop this practice.

            Another bill is being offered to put an end to wage discrimination. Women, on average, earn approximately 72 cents for every dollar a man earns, and unequal pay also hurts men in predominantly female occupations. Assembly Bill 294 seeks to strengthen enforcement of existing laws.

            Prison labor has become a priority issue in recent years, as more industries send work to the prison system, where artificially low wages create unfair competition for jobs with workers in the private sector.

            Convention delegates met with members of the Senate and Assembly to discuss these issues. Meetings were organized according to the Senate District where each delegate lives. Campbell and Merrill met with Assemblyman David Cullen (D-Milwaukee) and staff members for Assemblyman Scott Walker (R-Wauwatosa) and Tony Staskunas (D-West Allis) and State Senator Peggy Rosenzweig (R-Wauwatosa). The Democrats strongly supported the proposed laws, while Republicans looked for watered-down solutions to the problem.

            On the equal pay issue, Cullen was brutally honest. He said the Bill would "never see the light of day", since Wisconsin manufacturers and Commerce, the State's largest business lobby, is against it. The reality, Cullen explained, is that they will prevail on Assembly Speaker Scott Jensen (R-Brookfield) to kill the Bill. "That's the reality", explained Cullen.

            Mueller's delegate group met with State Senator Brian Burke and Assemblymen Peter Bock, Pedro Colon, and Timothy Carpenter, all Milwaukee Democrats with solid pro-labor voting records.

            State AFL-CIO President David Newby echoed Cullen's sentiments in a speech to delegates. Too often, he said, legislation that passes the Democratic controlled State Senate goes to the Assembly to die, as Republican leaders there hold up action on pro-worker legislation by refusing to schedule committee hearings or votes. Newby also blasted the State budget as prepared by Republican Governor Scott McCallum, saying that it contained $180 million in tax breaks for corporations, but nothing to ease the burden on working tax payers. (Since the Conference, the Governor's office announced an additional $500 million shortfall in expected revenue, impacting the budget even more.)

            Phil Neuenfeldt, AFL-CIO Secretary-Treasurer, slammed the Republican leadership at the Federal level, taking aim at the tax cuts proposed by President George Dubya Bush, the bulk of which would go to those who already control the lion's share of the nation's wealth.

            Neuenfeldt also attacked the proposed "Free Trade Area of the Americas", which, patterned after NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement would encompass 34 countries in North and South America and drag workers' wages and standards of living down even more, as NAFTA has done in the US and Canada. He also blasted the proposal to give President Bush "fast track" authority to push the proposed treaty through Congress quickly.

            Delegates from Local 7-232 also picked up useful information in topical workshops presented on the Family and Medical Leave Acts, both State and Federal, and on Federal legislative issues affecting labor.