Dems take a hit for state's future

In roughly ten and a half hours last week, the House and Senate introduced, debated and passed sweeping pension reform legislation by overwhelming majorities in both chambers.

The breadth of the legislation and the speed by which it passed despite heated opposition by hugely powerful Statehouse interests has not been seen in Springfield in decades, if ever. The only thing to compare it to is when House Speaker Michael Madigan turned against his trial lawyer allies and muscled through medical malpractice reform legislation a few years ago. But that didn't happen in a single day. And while the trial lawyers are very important players, their campaign cash and staff assistance pales in comparison to what the public employee unions regularly give.

Some are also comparing it to "Operation Cobra," when Madigan passed a tax hike in a single day. But Madigan didn't go up against a phalanx of major Democratic-leaning interest groups like he did last week.

Threats of recrimination were heard throughout the day as Democrats muscled the bill to the governor's desk.

Without the Service Employees International Union's $1.7 million during the recent Democratic primary, Gov. Pat Quinn would've likely been toast. But SEIU is in no mood to help him now. The teachers' unions went with Dan Rynearson against Quinn and it'll be more than a little tough to pry cash out of them this fall. AFSCME was neutral and will probably stay that way come November. Unless he can repair the damage, last week's action might have cost Gov. Quinn's campaign somewhere in the neighborhood of $3 million — not to mention all those volunteers to staff phone banks and walk door to door.

Then again, Quinn's Republican rival state Sen. Bill Brady is not exactly labor-friendly. In fact, he has such an anti-union record that the governor is probably figuring all will be forgiven if and when the unions see the real prospect of a Brady administration coming down the pike. Last week's move was one of the greatest election-year gambles I've seen.

As far as voters are concerned, this is no-brainer. As with Madigan's earlier flip on the trial lawyers, voters have turned sharply against the unions on the pension issue.

Some of the usual suspects were notably unimpressed with last week's bill, including the Chicago Tribune editorial page (which whines about everything). Eden Martin, the president of the Civic Committee of the Commercial Club of Chicago, criticized the proposal, saying: "The people of Illinois are not going to be satisfied with tiny steps in the right direction when we have a State fiscal crisis of this magnitude on our hands."

But those with actual experience in the legislative process and who understand that politics is the art of the possible and not about getting everything you want were far more impressed. Doug Whitley, the president of the Illinois Chamber, practically gushed about the bill last week. Whitley has long championed pension reform and he was smiling ear to ear all afternoon.

Quinn's budget director David Vaught said last week that it became clear during meetings with New York bond analysts that the state was in danger of a possible "double downgrade" in the run-up to a $1 billion bond sale next month. Such a downgrade would've put the state on par with California's miserable credit rating and cost the state big money. New York demanded legislation that would save the state at least $100 billion, and Vaught estimates that the bill approved last week would save far more than that.

The next fight will be over the savings generated by the reform bill. The proposal is estimated to save the state somewhere between $500 million and $1 billion next fiscal year. Initial projections were impossible to find because the bill was zipped through so fast that nobody had time to consult an actuary. The governor has already budgeted $900 million savings. Anything more than that, in theory, would be used to lessen the governor's proposed billion-dollar cut to education. But doing so would undermine Quinn's position that a tax hike is needed for schools, so he'd have to switch to a tax hike for the bureaucracy, which wouldn't be popular at all with voters. The governor says he's sticking to that $300 million figure no matter what, but the teachers may have other ideas.

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A scholar & activist visits the Midwest

Over 20 people from Galesburg ventured to Western Illinois University Tuesday to hear one of the most thoughtful and well-written scholars on water and agriculture. Exhibiting an infectious exuberance for life and the power of humans to live in harmony with their surroundings, Dr. Vandana Shiva spoke to a gathering of over two hundred people in the Student Union at WIU. Her focus was on agriculture, its history and its future. She didn't mince words. She articulated a lot of points prevalent on the need for a complete abandonment of modern industrial agriculture, the type that we see surrounding us here in Western Illinois. Her arguments were thought-provoking and her warnings stern. However, she envisions a day when Big Ag is no more and every day people once again grow food intentionally and peacefully.

An author of many famous books and articles (the book titles include: Water Wars: Privatization, Pollution and Profit; Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply; Soil Not Oil: Earth Democracy; The Violence of the Green Revolution), Shiva has become a household name across the world. Holding a PhD in physics and having extensive international experience in the environmental justice arena, she is a scholar that demands respect for her scientific acumen as well as her ability to translate that knowledge into practical and humane solutions. Shiva asserts that the world currently needs to undergo an agricultural revolution in order to stem the tide of the violent assault that modern industrial agriculture and, in particular, the major agricultural corporations, are making on the land and its people. She blames this industry for many things, including:

• the massive suicide of farmers (~200,000) in India when large corpora
tions have forced people off their lands after having manipulated them to accept new "advanced" farming techniques—ones heavily dependent on artificial fertilizer, pesticides, and genetically modified seeds;
• the resulting infanticide of millions of girls whose labor has become redundant due to the introduction of these technolo
gies;
• the patenting (and subsequent profiteering and monopolization) of seeds produced by centuries of biological selec
tion by farmers in the Global South (an act referred to as bio piracy);
• the reduction of our global food crops to basically eight varieties, when the number was in the thousands not to long ago—greatly reducing the diversity of the planet while promulgating large monocul
ular crops;
• the great expansion of water needs because industrially treated crops destroy soils and make them unable to regulate water levels;
• the flooding of "cheap" (highly subsidized) food on developing nations, which forces farmers to leave the land (and their self-sufficient lifestyles) and become dependent on foreign aid.

This is just a short list of all the problems she sees with our current form of agriculture. Additionally, she states that the idea (which is promoted by our media and Big Ag) that we need these "advanced" forms of technology in order to feed the people of the world is patently false. She points out that major international studies have found that non-GMO seeds grown in small diverse, polycultural farms is the most productive form of agriculture and the least damaging to the land. These are shocking claims but ones that are largely supported by a series of documentaries that have been released recently, including Food Inc., Fresh, and The World According to Monsanto, as well as several well-research books.

But for all the criticism that Shiva puts forth, she is a doer as well. Her accomplishments are too long to list here but she has sued large corporations and won (against huge odds) and she founded an organization to save seeds (see www.navdanya.org). She continues the struggle and firmly believes (in response to a question I asked her) that we can contribute to the improvement of the situation by: (1) buying local foods from farmers who grow with little or no synthetic chemicals; (2) growing our own food in this way and; (3) demanding that our food and clothing comes from fields and factories where workers and other life forms are treated with dignity and respect. Won't this cost more money? Shiva responds, if you counted all the "hidden" money used to pay large industrial farmers today (so that they can continue to overproduce a few "special" crops) and all the health costs associated with our bad eating habits, we would understand how inexpensive local, healthy food really is. She is a firm believer that if we all pitch in, we can make change. That's something worth thinking about, at least three times a day.