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## 2010 Session of General Assembly Mostly Positive for Working Families

***But Special-Interest Cronies in Both Parties Blocked Too Many Reforms -- Let's Kick 'Em Out in the 2010 Election!***

The Maryland General Assembly concluded its 2010 legislative session on Monday April 12 with mostly positive results for working families. Nevertheless, special-interest cronies in both parties blocked too many reforms – especially in the state Senate. This year's election offers progressives a welcome opportunity to kick out these bad apples so next year we can enact the reforms that failed in this year's legislative session.

The worst economic downturn since the Great Depression is hammering the working families of our state – the same working families who will form the bulk of voters in this year's election.

We don't expect a GOP in thrall to tea-bagger extremists to understand that – and indeed the vast majority of Republican lawmakers attempted to obstruct bills to benefit working families. But Republicans hold so few seats in the General Assembly that frankly they don't matter.

Democrats govern our state: a Democrat sits in the Governor's office; and Democrats control the General Assembly with huge, filibuster-proof majorities. As Democrats profess to be the party of working families, one would expect them to take vigorous action to help working families weather the Great Recession – especially in an election year.

And that's what Gov. O'Malley did, championing a raft of pro-worker bills, most of which became law. Dems in the House of Delegates also generally performed well this session. But too many Dems in the state Senate blocked, slow-walked, or watered down bills to help Maryland's hard-pressed working families.

### **Legislative Setbacks for Working Families**

- **Voluntary, public funding of General Assembly races** would take power away from the insurance companies, electricity monopolies and other special interests and return power to regular voters. It is already law in three states where it works great. PM and allies counted enough votes to pass this reform on the Senate floor, whence it would go to a pro-reform House for speedy passage. But Senate President Mike Miller – who championed this reform last year – bottled

the bill up in committee. Miller -- whose top lieutenants in the Senate have a nasty habit of coming under FBI investigation and even going to prison -- should be the last person in Maryland to want to kill this bill. Hey, Mike, we'll see you again in 2011 -- when, thanks to PM's election work, you will have a significantly more progressive caucus to deal with.

- **Fiscal Fairness.** PM and allies did not expect lawmakers to raise taxes in an election year; so we did not object to them closing this year's recession-induced budget deficit mostly with cuts, not new revenue. But we did expect them to refrain from *cutting* taxes on millionaires; and we did expect them to enact "combined reporting" which comprehensively closes loopholes by which big multi-state corporations evade Maryland income taxes. Together, these two measures are worth at least \$250 million per year. But our lawmakers chose to leave this quarter billion dollars on the table rather than risk angering the millionaires and corporations that write big campaign checks. The result: cuts in programs for the disabled and poor and a hike in tuition for middle-class kids at the University of Maryland.

### **Victories for Working Families**

Thanks mostly to Gov. O'Malley and the House of Delegates, the list of victories for working families this year is longer than the list of setbacks. Here are some of the best legislative results for working families in the 2010 session:

- **Rest break for retail employees.** All workers of course deserve a chance to rest every few hours on the job. This bill ensures that workers in retail establishments who work four straight hours get at least a 15 minute rest break and workers who work six straight hours get a 30 minute rest break.
- **Collective Bargaining Rights for Child Care Providers.** As most brain growth occurs before the age of five, it is vital that young children grow up in a nurturing, learning-rich environment. For this reason, it is hard to imagine a more important profession than child care provider. Yet these skilled professionals are often woefully underpaid. The General Assembly passed a bill to make permanent a 2007 Executive Order giving them collective bargaining rights. Thanks to their representation by SEIU, thousands of child care providers in our state now have a permanent right to collectively bargain for better pay, which will boost salaries and thus help attract the best qualified people to this vital profession.
- **The Fairness in Negotiations Act** creates a statewide Public School Labor Relations Board to improve the efficiency of the bargaining process for teachers, better administer workplace rules, and better adjudicate personnel disputes, all of which will help keep Maryland's K-12 system top-ranked in the nation.
- **Early Learning for Young Children.** The General Assembly passed a bill to keep Maryland well positioned to pull down copious federal funding to expand

quality, affordable early learning programs for young children. Inexplicably, Sen. C. Anthony Muse (Dem. – Prince George’s) killed a companion measure when unrelated amendments he tried to attach to the bill on the final day of the session so slowed down floor action that time ran out before a vote could be taken on the bill. Why would Sen. Muse thwart early educational opportunity for young children?

- **Combating Medicaid Fraud.** The Governor successfully pushed a bill that encourages whistleblowers with knowledge of false Medicaid claims to file suit and share in damages with the state, which could recoup for the state up to \$20 million annually in fraudulent claims.
- **Relief for families struggling to pay the mortgage on their home.** Mediation between borrowers facing foreclosures and their mortgage lenders will be required under a bill pushed by the Governor.
- **The Governor’s bill to close loopholes in the usury laws** governing payday loans that was allowing gouging of poor people to the tune of 600% (!) on some loans.
- **Expansion of Unemployment Insurance.** The Governor’s bill to make technical changes in Maryland’s Unemployment Insurance program will result in an infusion of an additional \$127 million in federal money for the program. Unwise concessions to business special interest marred the final result, but this bill nonetheless is a net plus for working families because more unemployed Marylanders are now eligible for UI benefits.
- **Backdoor Voucher Bill Killed.** The Governor was the MVP of the legislative session. But the Governor (along with a majority of the state Senate) did support a bad bill to give a tax credit to businesses that donate to private schools – in effect, taxpayer dollars for unaccountable private schools. Thankfully, the House Ways & Means Committee, led by its stellar Chairwoman Sheila Hixson, killed this backdoor voucher bill in committee.

### **This Year’s Election: Let’s Kick Out Special-Interest Cronies and Defend Progressives**

Overall, when we look at the past four years, legislation benefitting working families that passed did so usually because Gov. O’Malley and Democrats in the House of Delegates overcame resistance of Republicans in both chambers and too many so-called “Democrats” in the Senate. This basic dynamic results in Maryland – the richest, best-educated, and bluest state in the country -- underperforming from a progressive standpoint.

But we progressives can fix this problem right now. This year's elections provide an opportunity to throw out special-interest cronies and elect true progressives. PM and allies will soon announce our endorsed candidates in the 2010 election. We will then do our utmost to elect them. Specifically, in the primary election (September 14) we will focus on replacing bad apple Senate Dems with progressive challengers. Then, in the General Election (November 2), we will work to elect progressives and defeat conservatives. ***We will only succeed with your active participation!*** So look for updates from PM on how you can join up with your fellow progressives in this year's election to create real change. It will be fun. It will be an adventure. And when we prevail, we'll send back to Annapolis for the 2011 session a bumper crop of progressive champions who will complete the unfinished agenda of the past four years.