

# Unlikely Allies Come Together To Support Jobs

Andy Brownfield, Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (AP) — Business groups and a former labor leader came together on Monday to announce the formation of a nonprofit group aimed at helping create and preserve middle-class jobs in Alabama.

JobKeeper Alliance is the idea of Stewart Burkhalter, who recently retired after 17 years as the president of the Alabama AFL-CIO.

"Labor and business don't often see eye-to-eye," Burkhalter said at the Monday news conference, adding that both groups could agree on the need for high-paying jobs.

"I realized I couldn't do it without the help of the business and manufacturing communities," he said.

The group hasn't yet taken positions on bills currently before the Alabama Legislature, but it plans to actively support measures that create and preserve jobs, while opposing proposals that threaten them, Burkhalter said.

Alliance Executive Director Patrick Cagle said the group favors a law signed earlier in March that provides tax incentives for coal mining expansion. Cagle said the Alliance will likely take positions on more legislation in the coming weeks.

Burkhalter chairs JobKeeper Alliance's board. Also on the board are George Clark, president of Manufacture Alabama; Michael Davis, manufacturing manager at Toray Carbon Fibers America, Inc.; and Daryl Dewberry, vice president for the United Mine Workers of America International District 20.

Cagle said the nonprofit group is funded through industry donations, but declined to name any of its donors.

Clark said that a major concern is the aging manufacturing workforce and the lack of young labor to take over for an anticipated wave of retirements.

"We're looking at 40 to 50 percent of current employees who are soon to be at the age of retirement ... but have chosen not to retire because of the state of the economy," Clark said. "We're anticipating a large exodus from the workforce."

The organization plans on partnering with public schools in the state to help students learn in-demand skills and connect employers with career tech educators.

Cagle said the group is currently working with Montgomery Public Schools on a pilot program for partnering with local employers to get students trained with the skills businesses want and connect those students with possible jobs.

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