

Protesters decry Matt Gaetz, Legislature (VIDEO, SLIDESHOW)

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2011-05-10 21:19:39



SHALIMAR — Tuesday turned out to be a lovely day for a protest, and about a dozen folks led by a local Democratic did just that in front of state Rep. Matt Gaetz's legislative office.

The group, inspired by a call from an organization called Awake the State, didn't find Gaetz in, but took its cause to Eglin Parkway in front of his headquarters in Shalimar.

They waved signs that said things like "Vote Gaetz Out" and "Democracy not Autocracy" to protest actions the just-adjourned

Legislature took during its 60-day session.

- [View a slideshow from the protest.](#)

"We are trying to convey that we are not happy with what happened in Tallahassee," said group leader Ellen Holt, a board member of the Democratic Women's Club of Okaloosa County.

Protesters said they objected to cuts in education, restrictions of women's rights and legislation they say provided no jobs but gave tax breaks to big corporations.

"There were 18 bills to restrict a woman's right to choose and get medical and reproductive care, and not one to create jobs, which is what they said they were going to do," Holt said. "They're giving big corporations tax breaks and stepping on the middle class."

At least two in the group were retired educators who came out to protest bills like one that would strip teacher tenure and base pay on performance.

"If it's one thing I'm for it's education," said Shalimar resident Lit Lewis. "I don't believe in teachers being graded as merit is concerned."

Mary Graves Evers, a retired educator, called a legislative plan to require teachers to help the state cover the cost of their retirement a "pay cut."

"I taught in the day when we took that (retirement benefit) in lieu of a raise," she said.

Gaetz was traveling to Panama City on Tuesday when the protesters arrived. He said he was sorry he missed them.

"If I'd have known they were coming I'd have been there to talk to them," he said. "That's one of the great things about America, everyone is entitled to an opinion and a picket sign."

Gaetz, a proud conservative, called this year's GOP-dominated Legislature one "that advanced a conservative agenda."

"I make no apologies for that," he said.

He credited the state for "taking steps for the unborn" and argued that promoting teachers for exemplary

performance puts Florida “on the cutting edge of accountability in the classroom.”

The Awake the State group, which bills itself as a grass-roots organization with statewide pull, attempted to organize protests across Florida on Tuesday, Holt said, but didn’t provide Okaloosa County organizers with much time.

“I was hoping for more, but this is very last minute,” she said as 10 or so fellow protestors held up signs and waved at several motorists who honked their horns as they drove past.

“The problem is citizens don’t really know what is going on in Tallahassee. They may read a story or two, but they don’t realize how it’s going to affect their children,” Holt said.

“We’re trying to make people aware.”