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RETIREMENT ANNOUNCEMENT

Ohio AFL-CIO president stepping down

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BY **ALAN JOHNSON**
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As the son of a Belmont County coal miner who later became a steelworker, Bill Burga has union in his blood.

But it wasn't until he went to work at Timken Steel in Canton when he was 18 that Burga said he learned the real meaning of "union man."



Bill Burga

"Everyone needs to be represented in the workplace," he said, "rather than just doing what the boss says, right or wrong, safe on unsafe. It's a dangerous place. Without a union, you might be dead."

Now one of the most powerful political figures in Ohio, Burga, 70, announced his retirement yesterday, effective April 27. He logged more than 50 years in the labor movement, 14 years as leader of the Ohio AFL-CIO. His successor will be named by the union's executive board, but it likely will be Joseph Rugola, leader of the Ohio Association of Public School Employees, the AFL-CIO said in a statement.

Gov. Ted Strickland, a Democrat who's also the son of a steelworker, said he has known Burga for many years. Burga's union helped Strickland in his congressional and gubernatorial campaigns.

Strickland called him "a conscientious and serious labor leader" who, instead of being confrontational, chose to "work in a reasoned, nonemotional way to support the labor causes which are, obviously, so near and dear to him."

In five decades as a union member and leader, Burga watched labor's membership and clout dwindle. While one in three Ohio workers at one time was represented by a union, the number is now about one in seven.

The Ohio AFL-CIO, which peaked at more than 1 million members, now has 600,000.

"It doesn't mean the death of labor, but it means we're less powerful than we used to be," Burga acknowledged. "We're surviving."

Looking back on his tenure as AFL-CIO chief, Burga said some things stand out. They include the union-led 1997 constitutional issue to roll back benefit cuts for injured workers, and state Issue 2 last year, which bumped Ohio's minimum wage from \$5.15 per hour to \$6.85 per hour.

He also was in the middle of the effort to negotiate what evolved into Ohio's BestRx, a low-cost prescription-drug program.

"We had to keep fighting and fighting and finally the pharmaceutical companies came to the table," Burga said.

The man who came to the table was Kurt Malmgren, senior vice president of government affairs for PhRMA, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America.

"We were fierce opponents when it began and I think we ended up friends," Malmgren said. "As a union leader, he is one of the last altruists. What was driving him was to help all those laid-off steelworkers who couldn't get access to pharmaceuticals.

"He was in it for the right things."

Burga joined the steelworkers in 1955, later becoming head of a local and a regional representative. He went to work for the international union in 1969, a job he held for 24 years.

In October 1993, Burga was named to replace John Hodges, who retired as Ohio AFL-CIO president.

Burga said he will remain active in politics.

Dispatch reporter Mark Niquette contributed to this story.

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