

# **Rauner tours Alton; met with hospitality, protests at Bluff City Grill**

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ALTON - On April 5, 2017, Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner came to Alton.

Rauner toured Alton Wednesday, stopping at local facilities such as Cope Plastics before attending the annual Lincoln-Douglas Dinner, which was the largest sit-down dinner Bluff City Grill has handled since its inception. Bluff City Grill owner Cathy Gross said her staff was put to the test Wednesday evening, when they served as many as 400 guests - the maximum capacity of their banquet facility.

Gross said the dinner was extremely successful for her business, saying Madison County Republican Party Chair Jeremy Plank booked it last month on behalf of the governor, who presented a speech during the sit-down, black-tie affair. Gross said her staff had catered large events, and provided appetizers for crowds of that size, but had never actually served a "sit-down dinner" for 400 people.

"We set our goals, knew what we had to do, and nailed it," Gross said Thursday morning. "It was pretty nice. It's always cool when you're doing something new."

Despite Gross's success with the dinner, she was accepting of more than 100 representatives from labor unions across the area deciding to protest the governor's visit while standing on the sidewalk directly in front of her business. Protesters held signs decrying the governor's stance on both union labor and the middle class. While Gross has found herself at the receiving end of a "shame campaign" from the Carpenter's Union in Wood River for allegedly not using union labor, she said she understood and appreciated their right to protests.

"We didn't have a problem with the protesters as long as they were polite and considerate to our customers and dinner guests," Gross said.

She said she contacted the Alton Police Department when protesters began arriving, but only to ensure everyone was acting fairly and appropriately. Both Gross and the protesters agreed the entire situation was peaceful. Officers, including Alton Police Chief Jake Simmons, were on the scene to ensure public safety.

"We had one person who shook his umbrella at everyone coming in, but he apologized and stopped after the first time he was asked to quit by an officer," Gross said.

Protesters, who were both representatives of various labor unions and sympathizers of union causes, gathered with signs, work garb and megaphones outside Bluff City Grill, and stood on the sidewalk - waiting for Rauner to arrive - so they could have their voices heard and feelings known.

Thomas Brown, President of the Local 3654 Union of East St. Louis brought his megaphone to the protest. He alternated between magnifying his voice to lead chants and the megaphone's "siren" feature to make his voice and his fellow union members' causes known.

"We represent workers at the Southwestern Illinois Correctional Facility in East St. Louis," Brown said between chants. "We are the prison guards, we are the nurses, we do everything. We run that entire prison."

Staff representative of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Carla Gillespie, who is based from Alton, said the protest drew as many as 200 "labor folks and community agencies."

Gillespie said many of Rauner's proposed cuts have put the safety of Illinois's most vulnerable population in dangers. She said the unions were representative of people who help Illinois citizens from early childhood development to senior services. She said many people who work with the developmentally disabled were also in attendance.

"Rauner has done absolutely nothing to help," she said. "He keeps declaring demands as lots of people are suffering."

Brown added he believes Rauner has spent 18 months in office campaigning, instead of doing his job - a sentiment, which garnered cheers from many around him.

AFSCME has been deadlocked in a contentious labor dispute with Rauner for 16 months, Gillespie said. She also addressed some of the opinions of people against organized labor and Illinois state employees.

"People say we are some of the highest-paid state employees in the country," she said. "What they don't talk about is the fact we have fewer employees than most states. For that money, we are being asked to do a lot more."

Besides labor disputes, Gillespie said many state employees are suffering from a lack of insurance coverage. She said many local unions working for the state are unable to care for sick children, saying many St. Louis area hospitals refuse insurance held by workers for the State of Illinois. Gillespie said bills accrued by that insurance were not properly addressed or paid by the state - causing some hospitals to shut their doors to state workers.

"Rauner doesn't give a damn about senior citizens, children's safety, mental health patients, the safety of the developmentally disabled, or correctional facilities workers," Gillespie said. "He should try walking a mile in their shoes. It's common for them to get feces thrown at them."

By 7 p.m., when Rauner was scheduled to address diners at the Lincoln-Douglas Dinner, he had yet to arrive. Protesters still held vigil - including a candlelight vigil for services and benefits cut by Rauner - as the rain grew colder and the night grew dark.

"Rauner doesn't do anything for anyone but himself and his cronies," protesters near the entrance of Bluff City Grill said before leaving Wednesday evening.

A man who identified himself as an employee of Bluff City walked out of the building and told protesters, "I don't need a union, and I make more than any of you."

The protesters then asked if he had good benefits, and he replied with obscene gestures, inviting the protesters to "meet him in the parking lot, to see who makes more."

The protesters near the door confirmed he was the only person from Bluff City Grill who had treated them with any disrespect, and Gross said Thursday she told her employees to be respectful to the protesters or not regard them at all. She said that employee did not represent the feelings of her establishment in any way whatsoever, and assured that employee would be held accountable for his actions.



