

Right to Work: A Threat to Our Collective Bargaining and Academic Freedom

The New Hampshire State Senate has been moving with unprecedented alacrity to pass several bills under the popular misnomer “Right to Work.” These bills will make it illegal for unions to collect agency fees from non-members—monies that we need to cover the cost of representing all bargaining unit members. They also seek to eliminate payroll deductions, forcing unions to find other ways of collecting dues. As of this writing the Senate has passed SB 11, “Prohibiting collective bargaining agreements that require employees to join or contribute to a labor union.” HB 520, which does the same, is now in committee.

Local labor leaders refer to so-called Right to Work as a New Hampshire state holiday, because it comes around so often. But this time is different: the Republicans now own all branches of state government, never mind all of the country, and they are backed by powerful Koch affiliates, who have been systematically foisting these laws on state after state. (If you haven’t watched Citizen Koch yet, do it, and see how things worked out in Wisconsin under pressure from the Kochs and their “grassroots” group, Americans for Prosperity, which is now very active in New Hampshire.) If you examine the text of SB 11 you will see that it adheres closely to the template provided by ALEC (the American Legislative Exchange Council), also funded by the Kochs.

When I teach undergraduate writing, I try to impress upon students the distinction between assertion and argument. RTW proponents assert that these bills are needed to “create jobs,” but they do not argue this position with any evidence--they cannot, for instance, name a single business that has promised to move here if we become RTW. They also refuse to address obvious contradictions to their assertion, like New Hampshire’s already-serious labor shortage. So we have to assume their position is strictly ideological. Since only about 10 percent of NH employees are unionized at all--and of those, the vast majority are, like us, in the public sector—RTW is part and parcel of the broader Republican agenda to gut the public sector completely.

On January 10, over a dozen of us from UNHLU and AAUP-NH went to Concord for the hearing at the Commerce Committee of the NH State Senate. We testified before our very own colleague, Dan Innis, who as chair of that committee was required to publicly admit that he is an agency fee payer, and who moved as quickly as possible to pass SB11. Nobody likes paying agency fees or dues; but unions are legally obligated to represent all bargaining unit members, whether we pay up or not. Without those dues and agency fees, the union’s ability to represent us will be profoundly diminished.

Personally, I find that prospect terrifying. As a member of our contract negotiating team, I spent hours at the bargaining table in this latest round, and I saw that without a strong union—led by our whip-smart President Deanna Wood and lead negotiator Dale Barkey—I would have been looking at an effective pay cut. And as a member of the Women’s Studies faculty, whose emails are at this very moment being culled in a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request filed by a right-wing watchdog, I have seen that, when it comes to questions of basic academic freedom, the AAUP has my back.

More on the FOIA business later. For the moment I want to urge all of my tenure-track colleagues to get more involved. Call your senators and representatives and let them know that RTW will be disastrous for us. Come to the AAUP chapter meetings when we have them! And come to our happy hours, which we are instituting this spring, third Friday every month at Libby’s, 4:00. If you are a union member, talk with your colleagues who are agency-fee payers; hear their point of view, and tell them what the union has done for you. If you are among the many erstwhile agency-fee payers who became members after getting strong union support in a grievance, perhaps you would be willing to share your story in this newsletter.

Also, talk to your friends and neighbors about why academic freedom and salary protections are important for public university professors—perhaps now more than ever. Get to know your colleagues in UNHLU, who in addition to being talented teachers and scholars, have some pretty amazing organizational skills. Support UNH staff and others who are struggling to organize. If RTW passes this time, and it probably will, we are going to have to work harder, smarter, and more united.

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