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**Jen Dodge**

**From:** Sonnie Bentley <sbentley261@gmail.com>  
**Sent:** Wednesday, November 10, 2021 3:37 PM  
**To:** Jen Dodge  
**Subject:** House Labor and Industry Committee's hearing on public sector union reform legislation.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on this important issue. My name is Sonnie Bentley, I'm from the Pittsburgh area, and I am testifying on the labor bills that offer educators like me the chance to take much needed ownership of our professions and personal lives.

I am a paraprofessional for children with special education needs and was a union member for over ten years. After having been victimized by the very union that was supposed to protect me, I decided to resign. Despite the union's rhetoric, many employees feel a lack of support from the union that we unwittingly join when signing employment papers. Then we are intimidated and coerced into continued membership.

Our union leaders avoid transparency and accountability which we as dues paying members should be entitled to. Public sector unions no longer provide the protections that they were originally designed to offer. They have drifted toward corruption and bureaucratic decay.

Routinely, grievances are being denied. Members have no recourse to address contract violations since union leadership fails to disclose the addition of a Management clause without explanation to the membership. To learn more about the rules being used against us, I and other members hunted down the union's Constitution and Bylaws, which a majority of members at that time didn't know existed. We discovered that our union leadership had suppressed them, seemingly to camouflage numerous violations of these bylaws over the past 28 years—and to use them capriciously when it benefited them.

Just to name a few examples of the violations, the union denied pursuit of gender discrimination claims against the district, and never released a required annual fiscal report or hard copies of membership meeting minutes. We have not been fully briefed on contract negotiations, in fact we have no idea what has been negotiated until the arbitration meeting where the details are skimmed over and we vote. Unfortunately, ninety-percent of the membership has no clue what it means and will vote as long as there is a raise included. Our elections are unfairly biased, and conducted outside the bylaws. This explains why we have had the same local union president for nearly three decades. And that is just to name a "few".

To force the union to provide the accountability it promised, we circulated a petition demanding instruction on the Constitution and Bylaws, and description of our contract in layman terms for our whole membership. Our petition went unanswered several times.

At this point I'd had enough and decided to run for president myself. As the election approached, fairness and democracy were thrown out the window. Nomination forms were withheld from members who worked in the same building as me. I had supporters who planned to nominate me from the floor, but at the last minute union leadership switched to an "early voting option" which led to a plethora of bylaw violations. This conveniently eliminated nominations from the floor just a few hours before the election. I personally was denied my right to vote by the Regional Uniserve Representative when I refused to sign a waiver. I was denied my right as a member in good standing with the union.

Of course, these are all formal violations of our bylaws, so I filed a PSEA Member Complaint against the president of my local. After numerous emails and phone calls to upper leadership, it became abundantly clear that the corruption goes

all the way to the top. It took 13 months to receive a scheduled hearing date, which in and of itself is also a violation, and then my complaint was shelved during the pandemic. I don't expect my complaint will be handled appropriately, since history tends to repeat itself.

The reason I'm giving you these details is because the legislature needs to hear about the harms that are done when there are no legal protections for union members who are pushed around by union leaders.

What do union dues pay for? Solidarity must work both ways, not just for the union's powerful leadership—just like transparency, democracy, and accountability. The bills under discussion at today's hearing will offer us union members a way to hold our leaders to their promises, and to the guidelines they set in place.

I am respectfully requesting your most serious consideration of this legislation which will place the power into the hands of the members who pay the bills. In particular, we deserve a regular opportunity to choose if we want a particular union in our workplace representing us, or if we need to be represented by a different union. Union membership should be our free choice, with a guarantee that we can resign any time without compulsion or intimidation. These reforms will stop union leaders' bad behavior in its tracks and make them more responsive to us members.

Consider this, why are employers helping unions to forcibly keep their members anyway? What's in it for them? By not disclosing this right to new hires, it is indeed forced membership since a choice was never provided. How this is technically, morally and legally permitted is a mystery.

Thank you again for accepting my testimony and considering my story, which illustrates the need for these legislative checks on corrupt union leadership and employers. I hope you will act sooner than later on behalf of all of us who are experiencing this type of persecution from organizations that are supposed to work for us.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit written testimony on this important issue.

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This written testimony is intended for the House Labor and Industry Committee's hearing on public sector union reform legislation on Monday, November 15, 2021.

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Sonnie