

Chairman Cox, Chairman Mullery, and distinguished members of the Labor and Industry Committee, my name is Cheri Gensel, and I am a PA certified social studies teacher in the North Pocono School District. I love being a teacher, and I love my district and community. I knew in the fourth grade that I wanted to be a teacher because I loved learning and wanted to help others do the same. Like many teachers, I consider my job a calling and a great privilege I do not take lightly. I give my time, energy, and emotions to help my students succeed.

However, I always felt uneasy about being part of a union. My values and worldview were not aligned with those of the Pennsylvania State Education Association (PSEA) and the National Education Association (NEA). Even though I disagreed with the causes and activities they spent money on, it was understood that I would become part of the union. It was what you did when you became a teacher. On my first day as a teacher, the local union representative handed me a membership package. She told me to sign the last page and return it back to her. That was it. I responded that I wasn't sure I wanted to join the union, and her only response to me was, well you will still have to pay dues, so you might as well join. It was understood that becoming a union member was what you did when you were a teacher. So I signed the papers.

Over the years, I grew more and more disenchanted with the union. I didn't like how they meddled in what I could do on a day-to-day basis in the classroom. I was told, for example, that I couldn't sweep my own classroom, or cover for a colleague on short notice during my lunch period. I did not like that choices they made for the workplace did not always benefit the student. And I did not like that when the union voiced their opinion they spoke for all members whether the member agreed or not. My personal choices and views were never separated from the union's agenda.

The first time I was really upset with the union was when they called for a strike in 2014. I do not think teachers should go on strike except in extreme circumstances—I feel that striking hurts students. My own son was a senior that year and I did not want his school year to be disrupted. I also did not like what the union was asking for, I felt they could make some concessions and ask for different things at the bargaining table, but my ideas were dismissed by the local union president. In the end, the strike only lasted a few hours, but it left an impression on me.

The final straw for me with the union was when I was sent a series of letters in 2014 from PSEA, telling me that I needed to change my party affiliation, I am a Republican, to help get Tom Wolfe elected as the Democratic candidate in the primary election, and then I could vote for whoever I wanted in the general election. It also insinuated that my party affiliation—as a Republican—made me a bad teacher and unprofitable to my students. The union even sent a letter to my husband telling him I was going to vote for Gov. Wolf and he should as well. These letters hit me in two fundamental ways, first in my mission as a teacher to always do my best to help my students succeed, which does not depend on my party affiliation but my skills as a teacher, and second as a social studies teacher who knows the union does not have the right to force me to vote for their candidate. It's the US Constitution that gives me the right to vote and that vote is my business.. What made me even more upset was when I went to speak to my local representative about the letters and she assured me there had to be a misunderstanding and she would talk to PSEA about it and get

back to me. After her talk with PSEA, she never spoke to me about it again. I later read in the newspaper that PSEA said they had a legal right to spend union dues to tell me and my family to follow PSEA's political agenda. I chose to be a teacher, not a political puppet for a lobbying group that does not represent my personal views.

I wanted to get out of the union immediately. However, I could not resign my membership right away because I did not know how and because our contract had a maintenance of membership clause that said I could only resign from the union during a fifteen-day window before the next contract was signed. I was finally able to resign my membership in 2018 with help from the Janus decision

Teachers who think like me would benefit from many aspects of the legislation that is before you today. Many teachers do not know that they have a choice. I meet teachers and citizens all the time that are surprised that I am not in the union. They always reply, you are a teacher, you are required to be in the union. With this legislation, on their first day teachers will learn of their First Amendment right to not join a union or pay dues if that is what they choose—information that is not currently disclosed to them. They will also not be stuck in the union because of a collective bargaining agreement that contains limits on when a teacher can resign.

I strongly support policies that give public employees the right to choose. The right to vote on which union represents them in the workplace will allow for progress. When given a choice, people have an opportunity for change, change that can progress us all I never got to vote on whether or not I wanted to be represented by a union. In fact, no teacher in my district ever got to vote on whether or not they wanted to be represented by a union. That decision was made by my employer and union more than 40 years ago. I believe that if our union had to face the teachers on a regular basis and ask them for their vote, the union would be more accountable to teachers, and less likely to do the bidding of state and national union officials. With greater accountability, unions would have more motivation to focus on what their members need and want rather than on their own political agenda.

Thank you,

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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.