

Judiciary Committee

Public Testimony of Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF)

S.B. 163: *An Act Protecting Employee Freedom of Speech and Conscience*

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The Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF) is a statewide nonprofit that advocates for and empowers women and girls in Connecticut, especially those who are underserved or marginalized. For forty-eight years, CWEALF has been a leading advocate for policies that advance the economic security of women across our state and promote gender equity in the workplace.

We urge the Committee to support S.B. 163: *An Act Protecting Employee Freedom of Speech and Conscience*. Senate Bill No. 163 protects workers' constitutional rights of freedom of speech and conscience by establishing a state labor standard that allows employees to refuse to attend captive audience meetings or refuse to listen to speech communicating the employer's opinion concerning religious or political matters.

Unions boost workers' economic security. Workers who join together to bargain wages, hours and working conditions earn better wages, utilize fewer safety net services, and experience less turnover than non-union workers. When workers organize to form unions, however, Connecticut employers frequently utilize captive audience meetings and other hostile tactics. Captive audience meetings are mandatory, closed-door meetings during work hours, that often deter workers from choosing a union. Under current law, employers can discipline workers who speak up and even fire workers who refuse to attend.

Women, especially women of color, who are affiliated with a union or whose job is covered by a union contract earn higher wages and are more likely to access employer-provided health insurance than women who are not in unions.¹ Research also shows that women's earnings increase when they participate in unions. Nationally among women working full-time, those in unions have median weekly earnings of \$942, compared with \$723 for non-union workers, an increase of 30 percent.² Across all major racial and ethnic groups of women, median earnings are higher when comparing full-time workers in unions with full-time non-union workers.

Women covered by a union contract (77%) are also more likely to have health insurance provided by their employer or union than those who are not covered by a union contract (51%).³ Health insurance coverage significantly reduces mortality and improves access to health care, treatment for chronic illness, and use of primary and preventive care.

¹ Institute for Women's Policy Research. 2018. Retrieved from: <https://iwpr.org/publications/union-advantage-women-2018/>

² See note 1.

³ See note 1.

Workers deserve a voice on the job and the ability to fairly negotiate wages, benefits and working conditions with their employer. Union participation is a critical contributor to the economic security and workforce advancement of women. We urge the Committee to support S.B. 163 this session. Thank you.