

State Vocational Federation of Teachers



P.O. Box 290
Rocky Hill, CT 06067-0290

Ph: (860) 721-0317
1-800-378-8020
Fx: (860) 721-0323
Web Site: www.svft.org

Testimony of Greg Beyer, Vice-President

State Vocational Federation of Teachers, AFT Local 4200A

SB 304 An Act Concerning the Inclusion of Labor History in the Public School Curriculum

Education Committee

March 5, 2012

Senator Stillman, Representative Fleischmann, and members of the Education Committee:

As a former social studies department head, current Oliver Wolcott Library/Media Specialist, and Vice-President of the State Vocational Federation of Teachers, I want to thank you for the opportunity to support SB 304, which would require the history of organized labor to be taught in public schools. I am here today because I worry that many of our CTHSS students leave high school with the opportunity to join a trade union, but have little sense of what that means, and the information they are getting from media and many employers is far less than fair and balanced.

It was the labor movement that spearheaded the drive for public education for every child. It was the labor movement that played a central role in the elevation of the American standard of living and helped create the middle class. It was the labor movement that brought us many of the benefits we take for granted today: a five-day 40 hour work week; vacations with pay; pensions, health and welfare protection; due process; and paid holidays. These rights were not won easily or cheaply; people risked jail, job security, and too often their lives to improve the standard of living for everyone. We believe that the men and women who struggled against deplorable working conditions, bias, and abuse deserve the right to be remembered.

One incident from Connecticut labor history occurred in 1908, when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in a 5-4 decision against a local union in Danbury. It held that the Hatters Union had participated in an illegal boycott. The decision emboldened corporations to be assured that injunctions could be used to stop various kinds of

labor strikes without fear of intervention from the Supreme Court. Individual strikers were fined a total of nearly \$250,000. In 1915, the AFL proclaimed a Hatters' Day, in which workers voluntarily contributed an hours pay to help pay off the fines. The money collected kept 184 individual Danbury hat workers from having their homes seized in order to pay the court-ordered fine.

This incident, unknown to the vast majority of our citizens, is the side of the labor movement too often ignored. At its best, the labor movement inspires its workers to pull together for the greater good. Our students are never shown the contributions labor has made to our communities, our state, and our country. Too often textbooks distort or ignore the great human sacrifices made to help others. Our failure to address these real contributions in social studies classes allows multi-millionaires and multi-billion dollar corporations to demonize unions, and claim that rising costs are due to unions while they themselves lower wages and decrease benefits and pension contributions.

I am not advocating that students in our schools receive union propaganda. No true history of the labor movement could overlook the examples of corruption and racism that are unfortunately part of labors' past. But that is often the only story being told today, and a balanced teaching of labor history in schools will correct that injustice. As our students enter the job market, they should not feel they are fighting forces so much larger than themselves all alone. Our students are leaving the CTHSS knowing little of the history of the labor movement, and cannot make an informed decision about why they would want to join a trade union. They should know that Americans for centuries have joined together to create equitable treatment for everyone. The teaching of labor history is a necessary step to ensure that workers will continue to work together to build a stronger middle class in the decades ahead.

Thank you.