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Labor & Public Employees Committee Public Hearing
January 31, 2013

Jennifer Smith, Legislative Director, District 1199/SEIU Healthcare

- In *SUPPORT* of **HB 5713 – AAC Inclusion of Labor History in Public School Curriculum**
- In *SUPPORT* of **SB 387 – AAC Increasing the Minimum Fair Wage**

On behalf of the 26,000 members of the New England Health Care Employees Union, District 1199, we encourage you to support these two pieces of legislation – one honoring our state's labor history and the other advancing our state's economic future.

1.) In SUPPORT of HB 5713 – AAC Inclusion of Labor History in Public School Curriculum

The Labor movement is a rich part of American history, yet seems to be left out of the conversation despite its involvement in many of our country's seminal struggles that we already honor in our society and in our public schools — most notably the civil rights movement. Few students (and few adults) know Martin Luther King, Jr. was actually in Memphis to support the sanitation worker's labor strike just before his assassination.

Working men and women were a driving force behind the passage of national landmark legislation such as the Occupational Safety and Health Act, the Fair Labor Standards Act — which created the minimum wage, the 40-hour work week and prohibited oppressive child labor.

Those national changes sprang, in part, from our own Connecticut communities — from textile mills east of the river to manufacturing plants throughout the western half of the state. Our own families shaped U.S. history, yet our school children often have no idea.

We do a great disservice to students when we omit large portions of our history. The passage of HB 5713 will ensure Connecticut's children learn the full history of the United States, including the role labor unions have played in shaping our society. Similar legislation has already passed in California, Illinois, Texas, and Wisconsin.

This legislation is not an attempt to *re-write* the history books, but to include a vital part of our country's heritage in the education of our children.

We support to passage of HB 5713 and ask the committee to support its passage, as well.



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2.) In SUPPORT of SB 387 – AAC Increasing the Minimum Fair Wage

District 1199 was first organized by Connecticut women in the late 1960s working in nursing homes as nursing assistants. They cared for the elderly and only got paid minimum wage. Companies justified such low pay by labeling the jobs “just women’s work” and “non-professional” and “merely supplemental” to the husband’s income. It took years of struggle (and yes, in this case, forming their union) to demand this work be treated with respect and dignity with decent wages.

Today, the majority of jobs that pay such low wages are also “service” jobs — stocking our grocery stores, washing our dirty restaurant plates, ringing up our presents at the store, and even watching over our kids. All these jobs are vital to our economy and our way of life. Yet approximately 80% of low-wage workers are adults (not teenagers) with high-school diplomas (or more), and many are women. Even working a full 40-hours, a minimum-wage worker earns just \$17,160 a year — more than \$2,000 below the federal poverty limit for a family with two kids. The message this sends is that working hard at these jobs year-in and year-out is not only virtually worthless, they as individuals are meaningless in the eyes of society.

In addition, low-wage workers then have no choice but to rely on state taxpayer-funded programs like HUSKY to provide just the basic necessities. When 70-75% of low-wage workers are employed by large companies with workforces over 50, not small businesses, according to analyses by the University of Massachusetts, why are we subsidizing their cost (and their profit) of “doing business?”

It’s time to start showing low-wage workers true respect and dignity – it’s time to raise the minimum fair wage. We support to passage of SB 387 and ask the committee to support its passage.

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