



Advocating for teachers  
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*Testimony of Sheila Cohen, President  
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*Re: R.B. 5713 "An Act Concerning the Inclusion of Labor History in  
the Public School Curriculum"*

*Before the Labor and Public Employees Committee*

*January 31, 2013*

Senator Osten, Representative Tercyak, members of the Labor and Public Employees Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to address you in support of, RB 5713 AAC the Inclusion of Labor History in the Public School Curriculum. It would be a great benefit to all in our state to provide the curriculum described in this bill.

We've come a long way since early unions fought for and Congress passed the Fair Labor Standards Act in 1938 improving labor conditions and the well-being of workers, but establishing standards that actually save lives.

President Roosevelt called it "the most far-reaching, far-sighted program for the benefit of workers ever adopted." It provided a maximum 40-hour work week and minimum wage of 40 cents an hour in 1945.

As a veteran teacher, I can tell you that today's students and young workforce don't know about the labor movement, it's importance in America's history, or how dramatically it has improved their day to day lives. Most take for granted that in today's high-tech world, where nearly everyone has a cell phone, that they have workplace rights and protections, an 8 hour day, family and medical leave, workplace health and safety laws, prohibitions regarding child labor.

When workers enter the workplace, they know they must be paid at least a minimum wage—but they don't know why. They don't know that their parents worked for minimum wage when it was less than \$2.00 an hour, or that their grandparents worked for even less because there was no minimum wage law.

The labor movement is responsible for many aspects of our 21<sup>st</sup> century workplace rights and protection. Rights that working men and women in Connecticut and across this country today---so highly value---rights that were fought for by the struggle and sacrifice of those who came before.

Today's students don't know about those struggles, fought so that everyone would have an opportunity to succeed and live the American dream.

Our job, the job of teachers, is to educate children and help them grow into productive members of society. They will be responsible for our future. It's critical that they know the history of America's working class, and understand the activism that allowed for the emergence of the middle class.

The labor movement is closely aligned with the civil rights movement, which is taught in our classrooms. While our students know about the assassination of Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., and his fight for civil rights, many don't know that Rev. King was a strong labor advocate and that he delivered his "*I've been to the Mountaintop*" speech in support of striking sanitation workers in Memphis, TN— the day before he was assassinated.

The late great Rev. King said "*History is a great teacher.*"

*"The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, government relief for the destitute and, above all, new wage levels that meant not mere survival but a tolerable life."*

We should teach our children about this history. We should help ensure that they realize their responsibility to preserve the hard fought quality of life that over time, American workers won. Please support RB 5713.

Thank you.