

Testimony for Public Hearing
Appropriations Committee
Connecticut General Assembly
Friday, March 24, 2017
10:30 AM in Room 2C of the LOB

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Madam Chair and Members of the Committee,

My name is Tom Bontly. I am a professor at the University of Connecticut and a past-chair of both the UConn Chapter of the AAUP and the University Senate's University Budget Committee. I thank you for your opportunity to address the Appropriations Committee and for all of your hard work on behalf of the people of Connecticut.

I am here today to urge you to reject the several regressive measures that would roll back collective bargaining rights for state employees. I have seen up-close the damage that such measures can do. You see, though I have been a proud citizen of Connecticut for nearly 20 years, I grew up in the state of Wisconsin and received my PhD from its great state university. I have many friends and family there still, and they would all testify to the terrible consequences wrought by the state's 2011 rollback of collective bargaining. Dubbed a "budget repair bill", it was really the political equivalent of a smash and grab by the Walker administration: smash public employees and their unions, then grab all the political power you can. In that regard, it worked like a charm: union membership is down 40%. But as for repairing the state's budget – not so much. The state's unions had already agreed to an enormous package of concessions that would have had the same effect on the bottom line. Meanwhile, job growth in the state is half what the bill's supporter's predicted and well below the national average. Teacher pay is down drastically, teacher turnover is up, poorer school districts are finding they can't compete, and on and on.

I mention these things because I do not want to see Connecticut join Wisconsin's pointless, divisive, and frankly mean-spirited attack on public employees. Of particular concern:

- **HB 5838 – An Act Excluding Retirement and Health Care Benefits from Collective Bargaining by State Employees**, requiring "that future state employee retirement and health care benefits be determined by the legislature." That might sound like a good idea, but it is dangerous. It would create what economists call a *moral hazard*: a situation where one party makes decisions about how much risk to take on, while someone else bears the costs if things go badly. It would create an incentive, in other words, for future legislators and governors always to solve the state's budget problems on the backs of the very people who carry out the state's business.

Another bill of particular concern:

- **HB 5012 – An Act Concerning Pension and Health Care Benefits from State Employees and Officials Exempt from Classified Service**, which would convert all non-classified state employees – including pretty much everyone in higher ed – to the defined contribution plan and health savings account. Many higher ed employees (myself included) are already in the Alternative Retirement Plan, but why deny a small percentage of the state’s workforce a choice open to other state employees? (Could it be that the real purpose is to divide state employees and turn them against each other?)

Time does not allow me to address each and every one of the regressive, anti-working family bills up for consideration this session. Instead, let me simply urge you to reject these and other like-minded changes to collective bargaining. They will jeopardize working conditions for thousands of employees, diminish important state services, harm our institutions of higher education and their students, and hurt thousands upon thousands of working families all across our state. And they have little if anything to do with fixing the issue of pension funding.

Pension funding is a problem 80+ years in the making, the result of unrealistic investment forecasts and the overall economic malaise which has beset Connecticut for than half a century. Today’s public employees, who already contribute significantly to pension and health care costs, did not create the budget problem, and it is unjust and unfair to expect them to bear all of the costs of solving it. Indeed, most of the unfunded liability relates to pension plans that predate state employee collective bargaining, which has only been around since 1975. *Current* state employee benefit plans – the ones that were collectively bargained – are well-funded and far less generous.

More generally, let me suggest that we view collective bargaining, not as the problem, but as part of the solution. Every time our state finds itself in fiscal crisis, which it does with increasing frequency, public employees have stepped up to the plate and helped constructively to solve the problem. And they will again. Furthermore, collective bargaining agreements have tangible benefits for workers not even covered by them. They help to set the standards, raise the bar, and end abusive practices. They ensure that economic prosperity is not limited to the super-rich. The idea of the 5-day work week, of vacation, of workplace safety, of social security – all of these are products of the labor movement.

In a time when working families are finding it harder and harder to make ends meet – when wages for the majority have stagnated, when so-called “deaths of despair” are surging among the working class – we don’t need to weaken collective bargaining; if anything, we need to strengthen it so that more people have access to its protections.

Thank you for your time.