End Captive Audience Meetings

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Judiciary Committee

A little more than 3 months ago my coworkers and I voted to form a union and join Local 217 Unite Here at the Sheraton hotel in Stamford, CT. Stamford and the surrounding towns make up one of the wealthiest counties in the United States. Yet many of my coworkers and most non-union hotel workers in Fairfield county struggle to see a decent future for ourselves and our families because many of us work 2 or even 3 jobs. Some of us were saddled with medical debt while others barely took home a paycheck to pay the bills. The process of rank and file workers forming a union to months of hard work and meetings. We were forced to meet in secret because we knew that our bosses wouldn't tolerate union talk. We knew that our livelihood would be stripped away if it was found out we were exerting our legal right to organize our union; an organizing effort that was democratic where all had a say and organized by Stamford hotel workers.

When we finally gave notice of our intent to file for a union election to the Davidson company that runs the Sheraton hotel, we learned just how nasty the big bosses can be. What followed leading up to the election was 4 weeks of physiological torment in the form of captive audience meetings. I'm here today to give my testimony to the truly dehumanizing methods of captive audience meetings. In Stamford, hotel workers have beaten Lupe Cruz and Associates, one of the top union-busting firms in the country twice. I want to say the union busting consultants names for the record because they travel around the country making a fortune trying to trick workers out of a better future. And every worker should be on the lookout if they pop up in their places of work. Wildine Pierre, Eduardo Padilla, Jamie Brambilla, and Luz Slim were chosen to target and trick the Haitian and Latino housekeepers who make up the majority of workers at the Hilton and Sheraton. These firms intimidated workers with captive audience meetings in the following ways. They had 24-hour access and would hold workers in captive meetings for 2 to 3 hours or more. Sometimes as late as 3am. Each meeting they would try to trick us. They told us that the union was a business. They told us there was something sinister about the union, that the union was hiding something. In some cases, targeting our religious coworkers they tried to make people believe that the union was the work of the devil. They tried to make it seem that the union was a third party trying to disrupt our lives.

The company insulted our intelligence and underestimated our tenacity. We knew the hours of sweat and tears that we had all volunteered away from our family and friends were to better our lives. We know that unions don't organize workers but workers organize unions. The union busting consultants held Arturo, my diabetic coworker and a room service attendant, in meetings so long that his blood sugar level dropped so low that he thought he was going to pass out. Despite, these trials he continued to work towards forming a union. The company spread rumors about me and my coworkers being spies who were paid by the union. But we weren't tricked, and we held together.

Yet, four weeks of captive audience meetings were emotional and wore on people's nerves. It made some people take off their union button just to stop the torment. If you haven't been through one its hard to imagine what its like. If it wasn't for our preparation, and for those workers who went through this before us, we would not be negotiating our first contract. In fact, many of us would have been fired. This is something I know from the stories of my coworker and restaurant server Antonio who remembers what happened 15 years ago after a failed attempt to organize the hotel. The bill being presented is a recognition of decades of rank and file worker lead struggles against our bosses opposition to form unions. It's a recognition of the workers at the Hilton hotel in Stamford who taught us the tricks the company would use and how resist and win when things get difficult. What we really need is an end to the 4 week waiting period between the time workers file for a union election and the election itself. And yes we absolutely need an end to the physiological terror of captive audience meetings and the difficulties it puts in our path to organizing unions.