

STATEMENT BY SEN. BERNARD SANDERS ON WORKPLACE DEMOCRACY ACT

Let me begin by thanking all of you for joining us here this afternoon.

In particular, I would like to thank Congressman Mark Pocan from Madison, Wisconsin and Christopher Shelton, the president of the Communications Workers of America for being here today.

I am proud that this legislation is being co-sponsored by Senators Patty Murray, Sherrod Brown, Elizabeth Warren, Patrick Leahy, Kirsten Gillibrand, Debbie Stabenow, Mazie Hirono, and Martin Heinrich.

I would also like to thank Kellie, Mayra and Allysha, for sharing their experience of how hard it is for workers to exercise their right to form a union and to collectively bargain for a better future.

There are very concrete reasons why the middle class of this country is disappearing.

Since 2001, we have lost some 60,000 factories and millions of good paying jobs. Much of that has to do with disastrous trade agreements that allow corporate America to shut down here and move abroad.

Over the last 40 years the minimum wage has not kept pace with inflation and millions of workers are earning substandard wages.

In our rigged economic system, almost all of the new income and wealth are going to the top one percent.

But clearly we're here to discuss another major reason as to why so many Americans are struggling economically. And that is that millions of Americans who today want to join unions, who understand that collective bargaining will raise their wages and income, are unable to do so because of the coercive and often illegal behavior of their employers.

That has to change. If workers in this country want to exercise their constitutional right to join a union, they must be allowed to do that. And that is why, today, we are introducing the Workplace Democracy Act.

We are here today to send a very loud and a very clear message to corporate America:

We will no longer tolerate CEOs who fire workers for exercising their constitutional right to form a union.

We will no longer tolerate CEOs who threaten to move plants to China if their workers vote in favor of a union.

We will no longer tolerate CEOs and managers who intimidate or threaten pro-union workers.

And we will no longer tolerate CEOs who refuse to negotiate a first contract with workers who have voted to join unions.

And, that's what the Workplace Democracy Act that we're introducing today is all about.

Today, if an employee is engaged in a union organizing campaign, that employee has a one in five chance of getting fired.

Today, half of all employers threaten to close or relocate their businesses if workers elect to form a union.

Today, when workers become interested in forming a union, they will almost always be forced to attend closed-door meetings to hear anti-union propaganda; and their supervisors will almost always be forced to attend training sessions on how to attack unions.

As Human Rights Watch has said: "Freedom of association is a right under severe, often buckling pressure when workers in the United States try to exercise it."

That is unacceptable and that has got to change.

And, Brothers and Sisters:

Even when workers are faced with all of these enormous obstacles—even when these workers win union elections, more than half of the victories do not result in a first contract for workers a year after the election has taken place.

Today, corporate executives are routinely negotiating obscenely high compensation packages for themselves, but they continue to deny their own employees the ability to bargain for a better life. That is wrong.

It is time to turn this around.

That's exactly what the Workplace Democracy Act that we are introducing today will do.

Our legislation will make it easier for workers to join unions and collectively bargain for higher wages and stronger benefits.

Under this legislation, when a majority of workers in a bargaining unit sign valid authorizations cards to join a union, they must have a union. Period.

Under our bill, companies will not be allowed to deny or delay a first contract with workers who have voted to join a union. If companies refuse to seriously negotiate a first contract, this bill would require binding arbitration and the completion of a first contract in less than 6 months.

Brothers and sisters: The benefits of joining a union are clear.

Union workers earn 27 percent more, on average, than non-union workers.

76 percent of union workers have guaranteed pensions, while only 16 percent of nonunion workers do.

About 83 percent of workers in unions have paid sick leave, compared to only 62 percent of nonunion workers.

If we are serious about reducing income and wealth inequality and rebuilding the middle class, we have got to substantially increase the number of union jobs in this country.