

TESTIMONY OF  
IRENE M. TORI, VICE PRESIDENT  
ASSOCIATION OF CATHOLIC TEACHERS, LOCAL 1776  
BEFORE THE PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE  
LABOR RELATIONS COMMITTEE  
IN SUPPORT OF HOUSE BILL 2626

SEPTEMBER 18, 2008

Mr. Chairman and members of the House Labor Relations Committee,

I am very appreciative and honored to have the opportunity to speak with you concerning the passage of House Bill 2626.

My name is Irene Tori and I am the Vice President of the Association of Catholic Teachers, the sole and exclusive bargaining agent for the lay teachers in the twenty high schools of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. I have worked in the Archdiocese for the past thirty-two years, the first twenty-five spent as a Mathematics teacher at Archbishop Ryan High School in Northeast Philadelphia, and the last seven years as a staff person with the Association of Catholic Teachers. I have been involved with the Association since I started teaching and have been an officer in the Association since 1983.

When I started teaching in 1977, I was hired as a long-term substitute for the entire school year. At the end of the school year, my employment ended.

Before I was fortunate enough to be recalled to Archbishop Ryan High School the following September, I was offered several teaching positions in the elementary schools of the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. I declined those jobs because the teachers were not unionized. They had no voice. They had no input into their working conditions.

I would have been an employee at will, with no recourse if a problem arose. There was then and is still now no due process for the elementary teachers in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia. They have not been able to exercise their right to organize and to bargain collectively with their employers. HB 2626 would rectify this egregious oversight.

Another example that highlights why HB 2626 must be passed into law is the following: A teacher in one of our high schools has a spouse who is employed in one of the elementary schools. The secondary teacher wanted to be here today, wanted very much to testify before the Committee, but due to the spouse's fears that her employment would be threatened should he testify, he declined to attend. To quote the secondary teacher

“with me testifying, she sees an opportunity for someone in the media to make an issue of the couple who both work for the same church employer but the husband has numerous labor issue rights available to him and the wife has few, if any. She sees herself being let go. After having given selflessly of herself for so many years, she does not want her career to end in this manner. This is very much a real concern that has been stirring within her from the moment that I e-mailed our congressmen asking them to support HB 2626. There is little that I can say that will make her scenario any less real.”

As much as this is the very reason why he should be here testifying before you and why HB 2626 is so necessary, “it would be a source of constant worry” for his wife. She would be looking over her shoulder wondering “When will this rise to the level of threatening my employment? When would this worrying impact my health or my ability to do my job?”

This woman's anxiety is very real. She has no protection from any actions her employer might take because of her husband's support of HB 2626. She is afraid that her job could be terminated based on her spouse's union activity. The passage of HB 2626 would prevent this fear from ever becoming a reality.

Under the Aims and Objectives of the Association of Catholic Teachers' Constitution and By-Laws, the following two aims and objectives are listed:

To encourage, aid and establish academic and professional excellence among professional employees cited above; to encourage, establish and promote programs to further the academic and professional excellence of these professional employees.

To establish a working relationship between the Association and the employers of the professional employees cited above for the attainment of mutual goals and objectives that would benefit their respective faculties, students, and schools.

These are no different than any other teachers' organization would cite. What is different is that there are thousands of teachers currently working in this State who have no ability to freely choose a representative to speak on their behalf and who are without any avenue by which to seek redress. The elementary and secondary teachers in the Catholic schools cannot petition the Pennsylvania Labor Relations Board for recourse when they try to organize and bargain collectively with their employers.

We, the members of ACT, Local 1776 have a long-standing and mutually respectful relationship with the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, with union recognition and negotiated Labor-Management Agreements going back to 1968. In our contract, Article I, Section 2 reads, "The subjects covered by the Agreement are conditions of professional

services (wages, hours and other terms and conditions of employment) of lay teachers. The only difference between our language and that found in a public school contract is the word “lay” when referring to teachers. Unfortunately, our colleagues in the elementary schools do not have any language even remotely close to this since they have not been afforded the opportunity to organize.

In conclusion, whether working in public schools or in Catholic schools, we are all teachers. We were all hired to teach. We are all dedicated professionals who only want to serve our students. However, so many of us, on the elementary as well as secondary levels, have no say in our working conditions. Without this input, we are unable to provide our students with the valued education that both parents and students desire.

Public school teachers have the ability to go to the PLRB to resolve disputes. To date, the vast majority of lay teachers in Catholic schools don’t have that access. The passage of HB 2626 would level that playing field. It would give all teachers equal access under the law.

On behalf of all those elementary and secondary teachers who currently have no protection when seeking representation and collective bargaining from employer Church, I urge you to pass HB 2626.

Thank you.