

Chairman Cox, Chairman Mullery, and distinguished members of the Labor and Industry Committee, my name is Rochelle Porto, and I am a special education teacher in the School District of Philadelphia, where I have taught for 22 years. I love working with my students and their families and I love being a special education teacher. Unfortunately, teachers' unions have made it harder for me to do what I love.

I was a member of the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT), but I resigned from the union in 2012 because it was pushing a particular ideology that I did not agree with. The union brings divisive and political material into schools, which puts a lot of pressure on teachers and makes it harder for us to do our jobs. I also believe the union does not stand up for kids, and I care about the children I teach and think we should do what's best for them. When I left the union, I felt freer. I felt like I had my voice back, both as a teacher and as an individual.

For example, I was frustrated last year when it felt like the union was keeping schools closed, even though my special education students could not receive the services they needed at home. There were news reports on February 5th, 2021, that the PFT told teachers not to return to school on February 8th for in-person learning even though the district told parents that it was going to open schools. This happened multiple times to students and families in my district, they were told schools would reopen only to have the union change the plans at the eleventh hour. I was really frustrated with the continued back and forth. But since I'm free to think and teach because I'm not a union member, I reached out to my principals and I was able to return to work that day in February, and I have stayed in school ever since. My colleagues remained out until March 2021, and students returned two days a week starting in April. To this day, the children are happy to be in school. The special needs students and their parents are also happy, and it shows in their daily attendance - many of our special population classrooms had perfect attendance in September and October.

That's one of the main things I object to about the union—they prioritize themselves over everything else, including students, and they say they speak for all teachers when they don't. And they don't provide good representation to their members. Instead, the PFT is focused on their progressive political agenda, whether it's related to critical race theory, political endorsements, or keeping schools closed, and I don't think this is appropriate.

Another way the union tries to take away teachers' voices is by making it hard for them to resign their membership and by keeping information from them about their rights.

When I first left the union, I still had to pay agency fees, which were about 80% of what I had been paying before. But when I returned to the classroom in 2018, after I worked for the district for a short time, I no longer had to pay dues. At this point, the Supreme Court had already said public employees, including teachers, don't have to pay a union as a condition of employment. But I still had to visit with the union representative as part of the onboarding process.

When I met with the union representative, I told her I didn't want to be a member of the union. At this meeting there were also other, younger teachers and they were very surprised to hear they did not have to belong to the union. The union secretary was very angry with me when I told them this, and she said that I would "lose everything" if I did not belong to the union. That's the kind of immense pressure to join the union new teachers experience on their first day on the job.

Teachers have other options besides union membership, but we are not given that information up front. Many teachers have been told they'll lose their benefits or liability insurance if they don't belong to the

union, but that isn't true. For liability insurance, teachers have other options that are less expensive and, in my opinion, provide better coverage.

Teachers should have this information up front so they have the opportunity to say, "no, that isn't what I want my union to do, that isn't what I stand for." I believe that by giving teachers a voice on whether or not they want to belong to a union it gives them this opportunity. This simple change would give them far more control over the union's priorities and make unions more responsive to what teachers want.

Thank you,
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