



# Opening Statement

COMMITTEE ON EDUCATION & LABOR

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The Hon. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott • Chairman

## Opening Statement of Madam Chairwoman Frederica Wilson (FL-24)

Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor, and Pensions Hearing

*Standing with Public Servants: Protecting the Right to Organize*

2175 Rayburn House Office Building

Wednesday, June 26, 2019 | 10:15am

Today, we are gathered for a legislative hearing to receive testimony on the status of public sector collective bargaining and the legislative proposals which ensure state and local government employees can exercise this right. Labor unions have empowered generations of workers to secure better wages and working conditions. They have been essential to reducing income inequality.

Collective bargaining agreements are especially important in closing the gender and racial wage gaps, because labor agreements ensure equal pay for comparably situated individuals in the workplace. Based upon personal experience, I know the benefits unions provide for public employees. When I was a teacher in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools system I was also a member of the United Teachers of Dade union. So, I was very disappointed to see Florida pass H.B. 7055, which singles out teachers' unions, forcing them to conduct unnecessary elections in an effort to weaken teachers' ability to advocate for themselves.

Public sector union benefits extend beyond union members and also benefit *non-union members*. Research shows that, since the 1930s, workers' ability to unionize has corresponded to lower income inequality. Despite these widely-enjoyed benefits, the federal government does not ensure state and local government employees' consistent organizing rights nationwide. What we do know is that as many as half of all non-union workers would vote for a union if given the opportunity.

As our witnesses will testify, state and local government employees face an *inconsistent* patchwork of state labor laws that leaves far too many public servants behind. In fact, four states lack any regulation for public employees' organizing rights and many more have lackluster collective bargaining regulations that do not compel employers to negotiate with employees.

To make matters worse, last year in the *Janus v. AFSCME (AFF-SSS-MEE)* decision, the Supreme Court ignored four decades of legal precedent and 23 state laws to sabotage public sector unions. The *Janus* decision denies unions the right to collect "fair share fees" for services they are legally required to provide, which fundamentally undermines public service workers' ability to collectively bargain. Congress has both the power and the responsibility to protect the organizing and collective bargaining rights of all workers—no matter where they live or work.

This congress two bills have been introduced, the *Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act of 2019* (H.R. 3463) and the *Public Safety Employer-Employee Cooperation Act* (H.R. 1154), that will improve the lives of public sector workers employed at the state and local levels.

One legislative proposal that helps to protect public servants is legislative proposals like the *Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act of 2019*, which guarantees public employees the right to unionize and negotiate for better working conditions.

Specifically, the bill will create minimum standards for collective bargaining rights that all states must meet, while ensuring that states have flexibility in how that goal is effectuated.

While the *Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act of 2019* cannot correct the Supreme Court's misreading of the Constitution in *Janus*, it can lessen its consequences by strengthening the rights of public sector workers.

Another bill that will help public servants is the *Public Safety Employer-Employee Cooperation Act*, which similarly protects first responders' right to organize by setting minimum standards for collective bargaining. On June 20, 2007, this bill was reported out of this Committee by a vote of 42 to 1. Let me repeat that point: this bill reported out of the Education and Labor Committee by a vote of 42 to 1.

Then Ranking Member Buck McKeon, whose portrait hangs on the wall to my right, supported this legislation. And when this bill came to the floor on July 17, 2007, it was considered under suspension of rules and passed by a vote of 314 to 97.

Let me restate that point. It came to the floor with such broad, bipartisan support that it was deemed non-controversial and it passed with the support of over two-thirds of the House of Representatives. This historical note is important because it reinforces the fact that backing up public employees' right to collectively bargain has been a bipartisan endeavor in the not too distant past.

These two bills reflect our commitment to ensuring that teachers can earn decent pay, police officers and firefighters are compensated for their service, and public service workers can continue to fulfill their vital roles in communities across the country.

The people who keep our streets clean, teach our children, and risk their lives to save ours, deserve the same respect and protections as those employed in private industry. I look forward to hearing from our witnesses today and the discussion that will ensue.

I now recognize the Ranking Member, Mr. Walberg, for an opening statement.

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