

Paycheck Protection Legislation (HB 1507)
Testimony of James Perialas
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PENNSYLVANIA HOUSE STATE GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE
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Good morning, my name is Jim Perialas and I'm the president of an independent, unaffiliated teachers union in Roscommon, Michigan. I would like to thank Chairman Metcalfe, Chairman Cohen and the members of the committee for the opportunity to testify today.

I have been a public school teacher in Northern Michigan for 22 years. For most of that time, I was a member of the **Michigan Education Association**, a state-wide teacher's union affiliated with the **NEA**. Despite being a high school social studies teacher, my first day of employment was an eye-opening experience regarding the power of unions through compulsory membership and payroll-deducted dues.

Like most people, I understood what unions were and what their general purpose was, but I was amazed to find out that Michigan was not only an "*agency shop*" state, (compulsory dues despite membership status), but also that the union dues were being collected by a compliant employer. I suppose that at the time I was a naïve new employee, and did not think it was my place to question that arrangement, but privately, like many new employees, I wondered about its legality. After all, these union dues quite often were being used to fund political causes, and it was made quite clear to us as teachers, and public employees in general, that using public resources for political communications was a huge "no-no."

For example, we were told we could be fired for sending a political message over the district's servers. These warnings were coming from the same employers that were using public resources to collect the union's dues through the payroll deduction process. I will not get into the MANY other reasons why we in Roscommon were disillusioned by the MEA/NEA and its bureaucratic-political machine, but to make a long story short, we made three attempts over 20 years to "decertify" from the state-wide union and form a "local-only" teachers union. We succeeded on the third try in September 2012. The process, although technically simple, is in practice extremely difficult to pull off, due to the many advantages of an incumbent union. We were the first in decades to succeed.

The primary reason we left was that we had no voice. Most of us, including myself, are not anti-union, and believe in the collective bargaining process. Federal law insures the right of our union to exist and to bargain collectively with the employer. This did not change in Michigan, and would not change in Pennsylvania under proposed "payroll protection" legislation. It would simply provide consistency in the belief that public resources should not be used for political benefit. Teachers would make active choices and the union would be held accountable to those they claim to serve.

Since 2012, Michigan has become the nation's 24th "Right-to-Work" state. Now teachers in Michigan can opt out of paying dues altogether, even the amounts tied to collective bargaining, which I feel is an

appropriate use of union dues. However, this gets back to my assertion that the MEA and unions in general are bureaucratic and unresponsive to their members.

For decades, powerful teachers unions have been collecting and RAISING dues with no accountability and little transparency. When members ask how their dues are being spent, or if there can be a slowing of dues increases, they are met with accusations of being “anti-union” or unfaithful to the cause. We in Roscommon made several attempts to break democratically the stranglehold that the union bosses held, and were met with punitive decrees and even lower-quality service because we were “rabble-rousers.” Since we formed our own local, we are now accountable to each other and have 100% transparency, and 100% participation.

Lastly, because the public employers do not collect dues through payroll anymore, the members must make a *conscious* decision to fund their union, by writing a check. This places the onus directly on the union to provide its membership with a quality product. When we became the “Roscommon Teachers Association” we immediately lowered dues significantly (from \$980 to \$600 per year) but also turned the union’s focus onto grievance mediation and collective bargaining.

We do not participate in political action as a unit, but encourage our membership to get involved in politics regarding education policy individually. There are many organizations on both sides of the aisle that would gladly accept their donations. Furthermore, when dues are collected by the employer, there is little scrutiny by the membership of how the dues are being spent. There is a disconnect.

This is similar to why health care costs are spiraling out of control. When you don’t “feel” the cost of your health insurance, usage rates climb and there is less urgency to shop around. You don’t care about cost because they aren’t being borne by you. When our district went to a high-deductible plan, teachers did some more comparison shopping and were price-conscious. This forces health care providers to keep costs down and simultaneously provide high quality service.

In closing, I would like to reiterate that I am a veteran educator and a union president. I believe in collective bargaining and national labor relations laws. Union dues, however, should not be compulsory to hold a job, nor should the dues be taken from one’s paycheck by a public entity even though the archaic payroll clauses were mutually agreed upon. It should be a voluntary association and a conscious effort to fund the union-- if employees feel the union is serving their greater interests.

Thank you again for the opportunity to testify, and I welcome any questions.