

State Vocational Federation of Teachers



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Senate Bill 220 An Act Concerning the Inclusion of Labor History in the Public School Curriculum

Labor & Public Employees Committee
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As a teacher of 28 years and an officer of the State Vocational Federation of Teachers, I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak in behalf on Senate Bill 220, which would encourage the teaching of the role of organized labor in the development of the American economy. I am here today because it is my experience that few people, students and adults alike, understand the role that organized labor has played in the development of our country. With unions under attack throughout much of the country, it is not only appropriate but necessary that Connecticut students understand the role that the collective bargaining process has played in creating the standard of living we have in this state.

Life as we know it today would be impossible without the contribution of organized labor. It was the labor movement that spearheaded the drive for public education for every child. It was the labor movement that played a central role in the creation of the middle class. It was the labor movement that brought us a five-day 40 hour work week, pensions, and rules for a safe workplace. These rights were won neither easily or cheaply: people risked jail, job security, and too often their lives to improve the standard of living for everyone. We believe that the men and women who struggled against deplorable working conditions, bias, and abuse deserve the right to be remembered.

As an educator, I certainly understand and appreciate the concern that teachers be given one more mandate, one more area they must cover in the

curriculum. Senate Bill 220 does not create a mandate; it provides an opportunity for instruction. The bill states that the State Board of Education "shall make available curriculum materials" that will help in "developing instruction." Teachers who want to provide a balanced view of the economic history of our country need those materials. Studies of text books show that the role of labor in this country is given little attention, and when mentioned tends to present a negative picture by concentrating on violence and corruption. Too often, textbooks concentrate on the role of industry moguls such as Ford, Rockefeller, and Carnegie in building the economy of our country, with no mention of the working people and the struggles they endured to build the American middle class. Senate Bill 220 would provide teachers the opportunity to present a more balanced view of how the relationship between industry and labor has helped create American society, and the impact that changing that relationship could have on the future.

At its best, the labor movement has inspired its workers to pull together for the greater good. Our students must be taught the contributions labor has made to our communities, our state, and our country. I am not advocating that students in our schools receive union propaganda. The history of the labor movement is not free from the greed and intolerance that unfortunately is part of the past of many of our institutions. But that is often the only story being told today, and a balanced teaching of labor history in schools will correct that injustice. As our students enter the job market, they should not feel they are fighting forces so much larger than themselves all alone. Our students are leaving the CTHSS knowing little of the history of the labor movement, and cannot make an informed decision about why they would want to join a trade union. They should know that the OSHA regulations that protect them extend from Labor's response to the Chicago Shirtwaist Fire. They should know that Martin Luther King's last speech was to striking Memphis sanitation workers, for he believed that economic rights were civil rights. They should know that Americans for centuries have joined together to create equitable treatment for everyone. The teaching of labor history is a necessary step to ensure that workers will continue to work together to build a stronger middle class in the decades ahead.