

**Testimony of
Sean Stott, Director of Governmental Affairs, LiUNA! Midwest Region
before the
House Committee on General and Housing
on
Proposal 3
April 10, 2024**

Good afternoon, Chairman Stevens, Ranking Member James and members of the committee.

My name is Sean Stott and I am the Director of Governmental Affairs for the Midwest Region of the Laborers' International Union. My office covers all or parts of 10 states including Illinois, which is where I do the majority of my work representing our members.

It is an honor to appear before you today to discuss our state's experience leading up to, and its experience since, passage of the amendment enshrining in our constitution the protection of fundamental workers' rights.

Illinois and Vermont may seem like unlikely legislative companions given our population and geographic differences. Yet, both of our states share a lot in common in terms of their worker protections.

Not all states grant the right to collectively bargain to teachers and other public employees: both Vermont and Illinois do.

Not all states guarantee construction workers decent wages via a Prevailing Wage Law: both Vermont and Illinois do.

Not all states have a Minimum Wage law, let alone have increased that standard to nearly \$14 an hour: both Vermont and Illinois do and have.

And not all states refrain from intervening in the negotiations between private sector employers and their employees: both Vermont and Illinois are two of the 24 states that allow workers and their employers to bargain on a relatively level playing field.

However, in 2015, Illinois came as close to losing that balance as it ever had.

A newly elected governor made Right-to-Work (for less) laws the centerpiece of his so-called reform agenda.

This was not something that he campaigned on. In fact, the issue was not something that any nominee for governor – from either major party – had proposed in at least the last 50 years, if ever.

But, one month after taking office, this governor announced that he wanted Illinois to be a Right-to-Work (for less) state.

Despite the fact that both chambers of the legislature were controlled by supermajorities from the opposite party (and despite many legislators from his own party who were strong supporters of workers' rights), that governor refused to sign a state budget until he got what he wanted.

For the next two years, our state was paralyzed. What spending authority state government had was limited to court ordered mandates and the rare continuing appropriation.

Illinois' bill backlog quickly skyrocketed to \$15 billion.

Interest debt from late payments to state vendors alone topped \$1.1 billion – more than the previous 18 years combined.

The state's bond rating was downgraded a combined eight times and hovered above "junk" status.

Our social safety net was shredded.

This standoff continued for 736 days – more than two years – until July 6, 2017.

After the dust settled, the legislature passed a bill prohibiting local governments from passing local laws that restricted the negotiating process between employers and employees. Not surprisingly, that legislation was vetoed by the governor and, despite bipartisan support, an override attempt fell one vote short.

That legislation was ultimately passed and signed into law by a new governor in 2019.

But, as we all know, laws can change.

Illinois worker advocates had watched in shock and lent our voices to the protests as some of the strongest union states in the nation – Indiana, Michigan and Wisconsin – stripped basic rights away from workers at the beginning of the decade.

And we were watching in real time in 2018 as neighboring Missouri lawmakers passed identical legislation, only to see the voters reject that law by an overwhelming two-to-one majority months later with a "citizens' veto" referendum.

With all of these events and our own experiences still fresh in our minds, workers' rights advocates sought to enshrine this most basic worker right in the state's constitution.

Doing so in Illinois first requires a 3/5 majority vote by both chambers of the legislature and then approval by the voters. The Workers' Rights Amendment not only received supermajority support in the General Assembly, it received 3/5 support among Republicans in the state senate and a significant share of G.O.P. House members.

This level of legislative support transferred to the voters as a whole as nearly 59% of those who voted on the question in November of 2022 supported adding language that is virtually identical to the proposal before your committee today.

It has been 15 months since the Workers' Rights Amendment has become part of the Illinois Constitution and none of the criticisms of its opponents have come to bear.

Workers have not been automatically admitted into unions.

I've spoken to a representative of our state's Labor Board and organizing among state and local government employees has been no more robust than before passage of the Workers' Rights Amendment. And workers who did not previously have the right to organize under state law were not automatically granted that right.

Businesses have not avoided Illinois.

In fact, businesses, large and small, continue to locate in Illinois, the most notable examples being two private sector investments totaling nearly \$7 billion that will create more than 5,000 jobs.

Passing a Workers' Rights Amendment in Vermont would not only be a victory for its working people, it would also be victory for stability.

No longer would workers' right to a strong and effective voice in the workplace be at risk of being a political football blown around by the winds from one election's outcome.

The people of Missouri spoke decisively on this issue – a state that, by no means, shares the same political ideology of Vermont or Illinois – but not all states have citizen veto provisions.

It took 12 years for Michigan to officially overturn its Right-to-Work (for less) law, which finally took effect just last month.

The Workers' Rights Amendment is also a statement of a state's values. It says that a state places a priority on the protection of workers and that they will always have the ability to discuss with their employers issues related to their pay, their benefits and their safety at work and do so on a relatively level playing field.

Once again, Mr. Chairman and members of the committee, I am honored for the opportunity to appear before you today. I encourage your body to pass the Workers' Rights Amendment and send it to the people where it, I'm sure, will be approved in an overwhelming fashion. Thank you. I would be happy to answer any questions.