

Karen St Marie, Registered Nurse, Chief Steward, Rutland Regional Medical Center (OPEIU 6), 3/2/2023

Members of the Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing, and General Affairs:

My name is Karen St. Marie. I am an RN in the Intensive Care Unit at Rutland Regional Medical Center and as of September 2022 I have been in that position for forty years. RNs at Rutland Regional Medical Center are members of OPEIU Local 6, AFL-CIO and I am one of the Chief Union Stewards. I am in support of the Vermont PRO ACT.

I am unable to testify in person on March 2nd, 2023 as I am scheduled to work in the ICU and I also have a commitment precepting a senior nursing student today.

RNs at Rutland felt compelled to seek union representation in the late 1990s after dealing with frozen rates of pay and the hospital arbitrarily deciding to take away a week of vacation time. The RNs chose OPEIU Local 6 as our Union.

During our Union organizing drive, we were subject to Captive Audience meetings. Leadership kept track of who had attended a meeting. If an RN had not attended, leadership was sure to have a one on one conversation with that RN expecting the RN to attend a Captive Audience meeting. Several members of nursing leadership would attend every meeting. Enticing staff with “prizes”. One memory that continues to stay with me to this day is related to attending a Captive Audience meeting. I entered the conference room and sat by myself toward the middle of the conference room. Senior nursing leadership was already in the conference room and they were milling around the conference room. Just before the meeting started, they decided to sit. There were plenty of open seats, but where did they sit? Well, one leader sat in the open seat to my right, and another leader in the open seat to my left. Directly “surrounding” me in an attempt to quiet my voice. This was very intimidating and as I indicated, a memory that has stayed with me until this day.

Feelings of intimidation from leadership were the theme from other peers as we were subject to attending Captive Audience meetings during our organizing.

Nursing at the time we were organizing at RRMC had only a few male RNs. I mention this only to make the point that despite being a group of professionals, we were predominately females and leadership used that fact to intimidate and make us feel fearful of losing our jobs during the Captive Audience meetings. Much of that related to wages and benefits and the financial viability of the hospital if the nurses’ succeeded in forming a union.

Another tactic in the Captive Audience meetings was to make a point that employees other than nurses could lose their jobs if nursing succeeded in forming a union.

We did prevail with our first vote to have OPEIU Local 6 represent the nurses. However, the process to secure our first contract was less than successful. During that time, our membership voted against accepting our first contract which opened the door for a decertification attempt. Again, more Captive Audience meetings. Another vote which again the nurses voted to have OPEIU Local 6 represent the nurses.

In summary, the most difficult hurdle during organizing was being forced to attend Captive Audience meetings. The intimidation and fear are something we all remember to this day. Captive Audience meetings should be attended by choice, not forced.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Respectfully,

Karen St. Marie RN Chief Steward

Rutland Regional Medical Center