

Testimony of
Sean Stott, Director of Governmental Affairs, LiUNA! Midwest Region
before the
Senate Committee on Economic Development, Housing and General Affairs
on
Proposal 3
February 11, 2025

Good morning, Chairperson Clarkson 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 8 states and the majority of two others, including Illinois, which is where I do most of my work representing our members who work in construction, in our state's correctional institutions and drive school buses, among many other industries.

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

Last year, in a similar hearing, I referenced some of the similarities between our respective states' worker protections: collective bargaining rights for public employees; prevailing wage requirements for construction workers; minimum wage rates that are nearly twice the woeful federal standard; and the fact that Vermont and Illinois are two of the 24 states that allow workers and their employers to bargain on a relatively level playing field.

You may recall that 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 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 two years and six days – until July 6, 2017.

After the dust settled, the legislature passed a bill prohibiting local governments from passing ordinances 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 passed again 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 earlier in the decade as some of the strongest union states in the nation – our neighbors to the north and east: Michigan, Wisconsin and Indiana – stripped basic rights away from workers.

And we had watched in real time as Missouri, our neighbor to the west, passed identical legislation in 2018, only to see their 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, a significant share of G.O.P. House members and unanimous support among legislative Democrats.

This level of support carried over 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’s been more than two years 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. In fact, just two weeks ago, a decidedly anti-union Illinois (quote, unquote) “think tank” posted a story on its website with the following headline:

“Rapid growth in government jobs during 2024 did little to fix the downward trajectory of union membership in Illinois.”

That slanted and misleading post cited annual data reported by the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics. According to BLS, Illinois ranked 15th in the nation with 14.2% of our workforce represented by union contracts in 2024. Though this represented a slight uptick from the 2023 report, our national ranking actually dropped a spot from 14th.

In terms of rate of union-represented worker growth from 2023 to 2024, Illinois' slight 0.6 percent increase was tied for 12th in the nation. Other states like Maine (+4.5%), Alaska (+4.3%), Oregon (+2.5%), Rhode Island (+2.1%) and Massachusetts (+2.0%) led the pack – states that do not have constitutional worker protections similar to those adopted in Illinois or under consideration here today in Proposal 3.

Nor have businesses avoided or fled Illinois. In fact, businesses, large and small, continue to locate in the state.

In 2023, the first year after passage of the Workers' Rights Amendment, private investment through the state's primary economic development programs was \$6.3 billion. That number nearly doubled to \$12.5 billion in 2024.

So, if Illinois' Workers' Rights Amendment did not open the door to its detractors' hyperbolic predictions of universal unionization or business outmigration, what has been the result of the Amendment and what could it mean for the people of Vermont?

In a word: 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 of one election's outcome to the next.

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 year.

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, Madame Chair and members of the committee, it has been an honor to appear before you today. I encourage your panel and the Vermont General Assembly to, once again, 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.