



For those of you who don't know me, my name is Joseph Cohen. I am the executive director of the American Civil Liberties Union of West Virginia. We are a nonpartisan nonprofit organization dedicated to protecting and expanding civil liberties and civil rights for all people in the Mountain State.

And one of those civil liberties we fight to protect is the freedom of association. The freedom of association is the basis for the trade union movement. People banding together to try to improve their collective lot. Another civil liberty we fight to protect is the freedom to petition your government for redress of grievances. As public sector employees who have been denied your fundamental right to engage in collective bargaining, the only way you can improve your wages or benefits is by coming here to the Capitol and exercising your First Amendment right to petition your government.

And I'll assure you, you are much more likely to be successful if you combine petitioning your government with exercising your freedom of association. Because we know that when workers unite and speak with one voice, we are powerful. And that is the essence of a union. By being here today, united, letting your legislators know what you want them to do, you are ensuring that the working class can exercise its inherent power.

I do know a lot of you, because I am a lifelong trade unionist. And, before moving to West Virginia to come to the ACLU, I worked in the UE National office for 12 years. I was Associate General Counsel and then General Counsel of the National

Union. And I know the history of our union. And I know what UE means to the labor movement. We are the most democratic, the most rank and file, and the most militant union in the United States of America. UE is a small union, but it is mighty. It punches way, way above its weight class. You should have great pride in being a member of UE.

You are the union of the Republic Windows and Doors plant occupation. You are the union that has never cared what race or sex its members are. If you are a worker, you are UE. You are the union of sit down strikes and international solidarity.

About 10 years or so ago, sanitation workers in North Carolina—your UE brothers and sisters in UE Local 150 went on strike even though it was illegal. That small strike energized our union and it energized the entire labor movement.

Right now, right here in West Virginia public sector workers statewide are ready to strike. 20,000 teachers, thousands of school support personnel, in all 55 counties are ready to go out. They are ready to put their jobs on the line to stand up and say, “No more. We will not be mistreated by the state of WV any longer.”

I know you all have disputes with your bosses. That’s probably why you joined the union. But the big fight today and the big fight for the next 19 days this legislature is in session is with the people under the dome. The fight is with a disinterested governor and legislature that is openly hostile to the working class and public sector workers. That must be your target for the next 19 days.

It is only this legislature and the governor that fix PEIA. It is only this legislature and the governor who can finally give public sector workers a wage increase. It is only this legislature and the governor who can stop the fools’ errands of selling

state hospitals, or adding all kinds of ridiculous hoops to your ability to have union dues deducted from your paycheck, or to privatize our public school system.

Right now all of your focus has to be right here on the state legislature. And let me tell you, they know you are here and they can hear you. And they are so uncomfortable. The teachers and other public workers who have shown up the last few weeks have really made this place buzz. They don't want to look you in the eye and tell you what they are doing to you. They know that if the public workers in this state stand together—if the teachers, and the DOH workers, and the DHHR workers, and the bus drivers and all of the other public workers stand together, there is no way that the workers will not win in the fight. Everyone here knows it.

Stand with your sisters and brothers who will be going on strike later this week. Stand with them in public. Walk their picket lines with them. Write letters to the editor. Talk to your neighbors and friends. Talk to your legislators. You will win this fight for dignity. You will win. But only if you stand together in an aggressive spirit of solidarity and militant class-based struggle. And you have to be willing to stand together for as long as it takes. And then for one day more. If you do that, you will win. I am more sure of that than anything.

And solidarity is not just about PEIA. Solidarity is not just about better wages. Solidarity means standing up against the exploitation and discrimination of all working people everywhere. There are ridiculous bills in this legislature targeting refugees, and Muslims, and people of color, and women. And if there is going to be a unified working class, it needs to stand up for all of these groups being attacked by the legislature. Because the working class includes refugees and Muslims and people of color and women.

Regardless of your religious or personal beliefs, anyone who stands for working class solidarity must stand up for a woman's right to choose. Until women have

the basic dignity of full bodily autonomy, they cannot be truly liberated. And all workers' liberation is fully tied up in the liberation of women. We need to stand together now more than ever.

The attacks coming from this legislature against women's rights, are attacks on your union sisters. The attacks coming from this legislature against immigrants are attacks on your union sisters and brothers. And the attacks coming from this legislature against the LGBTQ community are attacks on your union brothers and sisters. If the union is worth anything, it is because it stands up against attempts to marginalize or persecute any of your fellow workers.

And just so you know, the eyes of the entire labor movement nationally are focused directly on you—public sector workers here in West Virginia. 25,000 – 30,000 workers going on strike? This will be the biggest strike in America in decades. Maybe, just maybe, the revival of the American labor movement will start right here in the shadow of Blair Mountain—a redneck revolt in West Virginia—standing up against a state government hell-bent on taking from the workers and giving to its corporate masters.

But here in WV, you are fighting back. Make us all proud. Make your union proud. Make the working class proud. Stand together with all public sector workers in this state and give the people under this dome hell. And if you do that, you will win. You will win, and you will inspire others to act.