



**Statement Submitted to the U.S. House Committee on Education and Workforce,
Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor, and Pensions**

RE: "Out of Touch: When Union Politics Leave Workers Behind"

Submitted by: Frank Ricci, Labor Fellow Yankee Institute, former Union President and Treasurer.

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Distinguished members of the Subcommittee. Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement in support of ensuring rank and file union members have their voice heard.

As a former union president and treasurer with more than sixteen years of leadership experience as a union officer, my perspective is grounded not in ideals or academic theory, but in real-world experience.

No employee or union member would object to a union advocating for better wages, hours, benefits and working conditions.

Such advocacy is supposed to be the reason our unions actually exist. Unions once played an indispensable role: protecting the economic interests and well-being of workers when it came to their employment. Now, instead, unions are marching in the vanguard of every social issue. As a result, the very workers who pay dues for representation at work have been left behind.

Janus, *Friedrichs*, and other lawsuits challenging union power did not result from workers suddenly becoming anti-union. They emerged because too many workers felt their voices were no longer being heard and their legitimate interests were being ignored. The pressure came from inside organized labor itself. Workers increasingly saw union leaders spending their dues on political causes, ideological campaigns, and social agendas that had little to do with the workplace.

During my years as a union officer, I learned that workers had little direct role in making many of the most important decisions affecting them. Although local officers are often elected by secret ballot, delegate systems replace the ballot system as union leaders ascend state and national union structures.

The further workers are isolated from the decision-making process, the less influence they have over how their dues are spent and what positions are taken in their name.

And workers deserve better.

The modern labor movement frequently speaks about democracy, but democracy requires meaningful participation. It requires transparency. It requires accountability. Most importantly, it requires that leadership remain responsive to those it claims to represent.

This truth is never clearer than when we witness national union leadership spending members' dues on pure political efforts, or when they vote to endorse political candidates against the wishes of their members or even opt to stay neutral as their members are clamoring for a vote.

Today's technology makes secure member voting easier and less burdensome than ever. Too many unions nonetheless still resist holding direct secret-ballot votes of their membership before making major political endorsements.

My experience and insight as a former union boss leads me to believe this reluctance is often motivated by the desire of union leadership and political insiders to preserve their influence over the endorsement process rather than allowing rank-and-file members to determine the outcome. This may be because when union leaders do seek member input, the results do not always align with leadership's preferred political candidates or priorities.

The rise of President Donald Trump highlighted this tension within organized labor. In many industries — particularly among construction workers, firefighters, police officers, manufacturing workers, and other blue-collar employees — significant numbers of union members expressed support for Trump even as portions of union leadership actively opposed him or favored other candidates.

Confronting a disconnect between leadership preferences and member sentiment, some unions endorsed a candidate that would likely not carry a majority of the rank and file. Other union leadership chose to withhold an endorsement rather than publicly endorse a candidate who lacked the support of union officials. In these cases, neutrality became a way to avoid internal conflict and political repercussions.

The broader issue is not the substantive outcome: whether a union ultimately supports President Trump, another candidate, or no candidate at all. Rather, it is whether union members themselves have a meaningful opportunity to participate in a transparent and democratic decision making process.

The policy reform to address this issue is straightforward. Any union that is required to report its financials should require a direct, secret vote of its entire membership for political spending and political endorsements. The endorsements are being made in the name of the rank-and-file; accordingly, those members should, at the very least, have a say on how their hard earned dues are spent.

This is particularly true where, as today, many unions spend substantial resources on issues far removed from wages, hours, and working conditions. Unions now use collective bargaining

agreements to advance broader social and political objectives that would otherwise face public debate through the legislative process.

Yankee Institute's [published](#) work has noted recurring instances of collective bargaining agreements being used to advance policy goals unrelated to work, classroom instruction, compensation, or working conditions. As a result, workers often discover they are being forced to fund causes they never voted to support because of embedment into a larger contract.

One egregious example involves many unions' decision to embrace race Marxism over merit with the adoption of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs that emphasize equality of outcome rather than equality of opportunity. America works best when advancement is based upon merit, character, skill, discipline, and achievement.

The Supreme Court recognized this principle in *Ricci v. DeStefano* (2009), when it held that government cannot disregard merit-based results because of racial outcomes. The Court reaffirmed similar equal-protection principles in *Students for Fair Admission v. Harvard* (2023).

Unions should champion equal opportunity for every worker. They should not promote any system that divides workers into competing identity groups. If discrimination or racism is found, then we owe it to each other to root it out. We should be judged fairly and rise and fall based on our own merit.

Achievement isn't the exclusive purview of any single race, ethnicity, or political group, and any program which — like DEI — divides us into competing factions based on immutable characteristics leads only to discrimination and coercion, rather than emphasizing achievement in the workplace and our shared purpose as workers and Americans.

One of the greatest problems facing union members today is financial transparency.

Throughout my years in labor leadership, I was never informed of many of the financial disclosure tools supposedly available to union members. I later discovered that even experienced union officers often know little about LM-2 reports and other federal disclosure requirements.

Many unions inhibit financial transparency by filing under obscure legal [names](#) that ordinary members would never recognize. The result is a system where information technically exists but remains effectively [hidden](#) from the people paying the dues.

Recent U.S. Department of Labor transparency [initiatives](#) have been an important step forward. Workers should be able to locate financial disclosures easily, in order to understand how their dues money is being spent. Transparency is not anti-union.

Transparency is pro-worker. This committee should bolster financial reporting requirements by adding a mandate that unions provide a copy of their financials once a year to their members. Connecticut requires this [disclosure](#) for public unions with more than 25 members. These union financials should include end of year credit card summaries that break down yearly spending on the cards into easily understandable categories, allowing members to easily understand how their dues

were spent.

I want to be clear. There are examples of unions operating in a non-partisan way. These should be acknowledged.

Some union leadership is willing to break from traditional partisan expectations and side with the practical interests of workers. Teamsters stood with the Trump administration, fighting for workers to be paid when Democrats voted to shut down the government.

On the flipside, I have witnessed unions oppose common sense, pro-worker policies including “no tax on tips” and “no tax on overtime.” It makes no sense to advocate against policies that allow workers to keep more of what they earn, and which incentivize hard work without being inflationary— even if the Trump administration proposed them.

Workers understand economic reality in a way that many in the comfortable political class may not. They realize bills arrive every month. They know inflation can erase wage gains — and that while union leadership fights for a higher minimum wage, they realize it only increases inflation and incentivizes automation. And they understand that government shutdowns affect paychecks. Above all, they know that politics should never come before the interests of working families.

The future of organized labor depends on rebuilding trust between leadership and the members they claim to represent. This committee plays a vital role in implementing policy solutions that can help the American worker.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Require all national political endorsements to be approved by a direct vote of the membership through secret ballot.
- Require all union elections and major membership votes to be conducted through secret ballot.
- Require direct membership approval before union dues are spent on candidate endorsements or partisan political activities.
- Require unions to post LM-2 reports prominently on their websites and furnish copies to their members electronically.
- Require publication of annual credit-card spending summaries categorized by expense type, with only card numbers redacted.
- Promote equal opportunity and merit-based advancement, ending policies designed to engineer equal outcomes based on immutable characteristics.
- Expand financial transparency tools so workers can easily understand how their dues are being spent.

- Increase direct rank-and-file participation in major governance decisions.

CONCLUSION

Organized labor does not need less democracy. It needs more. It does not need less transparency. It needs more. It does not need to become an extension of any political party. It needs to become more responsive to the workers who fund it.

When unions focus on wages, benefits, workplace safety, and working conditions, workers benefit. When unions place politics ahead of workers, workers are left behind.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this statement.

Frank Ricci