

# Land of the Free?

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At four minutes past midnight on Dec. 10, 1948—57 years ago—the world changed.

That was when the United Nations General Assembly solemnly passed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. For the first time ever, the world's major governments agreed on a common standard of human rights. Eleanor Roosevelt, one of the most beloved Americans of her day, told the delegates, "We stand today on the threshold of a great event both in the life of the United Nations and in the life of mankind."

Each article in the Declaration was voted on separately. Several had abstentions or nay votes. But all of the nations voted for Article 23, which declared, "Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests."

In those days, the United States could proudly stand before the world as a land where that right was respected. Other countries admired our National Labor Relations Act and its crown jewel, the National Labor Relations Board, for protecting the freedom of our working people to choose a union.

Since then, though, something has gone terribly wrong. Today, you can largely express any opinion you want and worship how you choose—but if you want to exercise your freedom to join a union, you're in serious trouble. Your employer may lie to you, intimidate you, spy on you, and perhaps even fire you illegally.

The sad result, as a Peter D. Hart survey indicates, is that more than half of American workers would be in unions if they could choose freely, yet only 12.5 percent of American workers are in unions now.

Why is this the freedom to choose a

union so important in the first place? Because if you work for a living and live from paycheck to paycheck, that union card in your wallet can make all the difference in the world. Union members have median wages 28 percent higher than those of workers who don't have the chance to be in a union. Strong unions serve as the gateway to the middle class for average workers.

**How could we bring back the freedom of American workers to choose unions? One of the best steps would be for Congress to pass the Employee Free Choice Act.**

An Economic Policy Institute (EPI) study shows that as unions have weakened, the gap between white-collar and blue-collar wages has grown substantially. And unions help you even if you're not in a union. The EPI has shown that strong unions actually set a higher pay standard for everyone in an industry and that nonunion employers follow that standard.

The bottom line is that with a union, a telephone operator can own a home, a secretary can send her kids to college, and an assembly-line worker can count on health insurance and a vacation. But today, all that's in jeopardy. Why?

Two reasons. First, the law itself has been whittled down to almost nothing. Wilma Liebman, who sits on the National Labor Relations Board, puts it bluntly: "The law's remedies for labor law violations are weak and ineffective." She tells how workers' rights fall victim to delays in the legal process and to decisions of the Board itself that "often narrow the circle of the [National Labor Relations] Act's protections, affording fewer rights to fewer workers."

But another larger problem is that employers throughout the economy are waging systematic war on their own employees who try to exercise their free choice to organize into a union. Sometimes these employers actually boast of what they do, much like segregationist politicians who once crushed civil rights in the South. Other times, they work in the shadows. But either way, their tactics are usually the same.

Kate Bronfenbrenner of Cornell University reported in her landmark study that 25 percent of private-sector employers illegally fire at least one worker for union activity during organizing campaigns, 75 percent hire union-busting consultants to help them fight workers' organizing drives, and 92 percent force employees to attend closed-door meetings against the union. As the NLRB's Wilma Liebman says, "Labor law is inadequate to protect workers' rights to organize, particularly in the face of these kinds of tactics."

How could we bring back the freedom of American workers to choose unions? One of the best steps would be for Congress to pass the Employee Free Choice Act. This reform guarantees that when a majority of the employees where you work sign a statement saying they want to be represented by a union, you get your union—period. It avoids the NLRB's terrible meat-grinder-like process—the months of employer threats, surveillance, coercion, and firing—that so many workers have to go through now.

This reform is simple, it's fair, and it would strengthen one of the most precious freedoms that working people can ever have. What's more, it would help restore America to what it should always be: a beacon of human rights for the entire world, just as it was on that chilly December night 57 years ago. 🌐