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ACLU OF RI POSITION: SUPPORT

TESTIMONY ON 25-H 5506, RELATING TO LABOR RELATIONS ACT – EMPLOYEE FREE SPEECH RIGHTS April 2, 2025

The ACLU of Rhode Island supports this bill, which attempts to protect the free speech rights of private employees in the workplace in a few narrow but key areas. In doing so, we believe it also protects the independent free speech rights of employers to make their views known on business-related matters and to reasonably control the work environment.

Specifically, the legislation would generally bar employers from disciplining employees for refusing to attend an employer-sponsored meeting, or to listen to an employer's opinionated communications, on religious or political matters that are unrelated to the company's business activities. We are aware of the heavy-handed tactics some employers use to dissuade employees from joining a union, including forcing them to listen to lengthy and multiple anti-union screeds. A legislative attempt to address that problem is appropriate in light of the important statutory rights that employees have to organize and join unions. Similarly, allowing an employer to harangue employees on religious matters at mandatory meetings conflicts with anti-discrimination laws and can be legitimately restricted by legislation.

It is important to emphasize that this legislation is narrowly crafted to address "captive audience" situations on political and religious topics that employers simply should not have the power to coerce their employees to listen to. It does not in any way prohibit mandatory meetings on matters related to the employer's business and business activities or an employee's job responsibilities. Instead, this legislation strikes a balance that protects the free speech rights of both employers and employees. We therefore support its passage.

Thank you for your time and attention to our views.