

Faces of the Employee Free Choice Act

John Pezzana

Engineering Technician
Cheswick, PA

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Starting a New Career

After 10 years as the supervisor and manager of a Pittsburgh-area janitorial company, John Pezzana decided to put his degree in electronics to use in 1996 as an engineering technician for the cable company Comcast. Today, John installs and upgrades video, telephone, and high-speed internet equipment, and says he’s “rewarded by the challenges that come with constantly adapting to advances in technology.”

Fighting to Keep a Union

In 2000, a group of John’s fellow technicians became interested in joining a union. They organized, collected cards and in their first election in 2001, elected the Communications Workers of America as their union. Although the bargaining process went well initially, Comcast tried to take away pension benefits after six months. Over the next five years the union struggled with the company to negotiate their first contract. Comcast forced them to go through three elections seeking to decertify the union, none of which succeeded.

Comcast also conducted one-on-one meetings between workers and HR representatives – some of whom referred to themselves as the “labor S.W.A.T.” team – and held larger meetings to single out pro-union employees like John. In one case, they promised to get approval under insurance for an employee’s operation and extend his medical leave in exchange for an anti-union vote. The company also concentrated layoffs on those forming a union in the Pittsburgh office, and promoted other anti-union employees in that office. Finally in 2006 the company agreed to a contract. “We feel more secure in our positions, and in some aspects it’s a lot easier to work with management knowing we both have to follow the contract instead of just winging it,” says John.

Why We Need the Employee Free Choice Act

A lifelong Republican, John served as a vice president in his local union. Now a union steward, he has been speaking out over the last five years about the need for the Employee Free Choice Act. One of his goals has been to educate his own teenage children and their friends about the importance of this legislation. “It shouldn’t be this difficult to join a union. The Employee Free Choice Act would eliminate harassment, coercion and intimidation from employers,” says John. “We’re just asking for a bill that restores our rights as workers to organize a union and bargain collectively.”

As John explains, “there’s a false theory around secret ballot elections. ‘Secret’ ballot union elections aren’t secret. The company can find out where people stand through all sorts of methods and apply unfair pressure. And the votes are held on company property. That’s like asking politicians to hold their election at their opponent’s house. If they think they can get re-elected under conditions like that, they’re wrong.”