

Faces of the Employee Free Choice Act

Roberta Ayala

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Making a Difference for Children

During college Roberta Ayala majored in art education, combining her artistic abilities and her love of working with children. Unfortunately, jobs for art teachers were scarce, but because Roberta believed she could still have a positive impact on children's lives, she looked for other opportunities in local schools. Eventually in 2005, Roberta took a job as a teacher's aide at Laradon, a private school in Denver, where she worked with non-verbal autistic children and teenagers with severe emotional problems. She helped them with basic personal and medical needs, and provided academic support – even teaching the occasional art class.

Treating Frontline Workers Fairly

Roberta enjoyed her job, in spite of the occasional violent outburst from students and other challenges. But at the same time, she and other aides felt that their concerns about understaffing, lack of proper training, safety, and spending priorities weren't being taken seriously by their supervisors, even though teacher's aides were the "frontline" workers with the children. "I had always believed a union was the fairest way to work," says Roberta, whose father and grandfather were in unions. "I believed that if we had a union, this unfair treatment wouldn't be happening. I wanted my coworkers to be treated fairly so we could be better advocates for our students."

In August 2007, after Roberta and her coworkers' concerns were dismissed again by their supervisors at Laradon, they approached a local union representative. The school management retaliated immediately by harassing and intimidating the workers, and several aides were fired. Despite the pressure, in November 2007 Roberta and her coworkers voted successfully to form a union. It still took another 18 months to get a contract. "They wanted us to give up and they knew we didn't have the resources they had," says Roberta of the negotiations process, which took place at inconvenient times, forcing Roberta to miss time with her husband and young son.

Why We Need the Employee Free Choice Act

Roberta believes the union made some important gains for the members, including more days off and locking in benefits. But Roberta also knows the process would have been much better under the Employee Free Choice Act. "Having the card count in the beginning of the process is better instead of wasting so much money and time that could have been used for so many other things," she says. "When the teachers and staff are happy, the kids are going to be happy."

