

Making workers' lives better

What happened to Bill Lawton is a shame, probably a crime and no one has been able to help him. His is, unfortunately, not an isolated story about the plight of today's American worker.

Lawton was a forklift operator for Consolidated Biscuit Co. in McComb, Ohio. He, along with about 75 percent of the workers at the plant, tried to organize a union. The employer went ballistic. There were threats, harassment, mandatory anti-union meetings. The company said it would cut benefits, that it would close the plant. This intimidation caused enough workers to back away from the union so that the election went management's way. Then Lawton was fired. All this happened more than four years ago.

The employer's tactics were so patently illegal that even the Bush era National Labor Relations Board ordered that Lawton be reinstated with back pay.

He's still waiting. The company has managed to delay and delay with seeming impunity.

He who holds the purse strings holds the power - unless everyone else can unite in opposition. Then there might be a balance of power. That's the theory behind the union movement. Educators in New York City schools played this out more than 40 years ago, and we are trying to do the same now for those -teachers who work in charter schools. (And you see the same resistance as Lawton's employer had from many charter school operators and providers.) Can you imagine working in the public schools these days without a strong union of colleagues to back you up?

For most workers in this country, however, that's exactly the situation they find themselves in. Anti-union conservatives have been able to engender a climate in which employers feel free to ignore even the weak protections that workers have to join together.

An attempt to change that is under way in Congress. Rep. George Miller, DCalif., with 230 co-sponsors, including a number of Republicans, has introduced the Employee Free Choice Act, which would restore workers' freedom to form or join unions to bargain for better wages and working conditions. The bill strengthens penalties for companies that break the law by coercing or intimidating employers; it establishes a third-party mediation and arbitration process when employers and employees can't agree on a first contract; and it enables employees to form unions when a majority choose to do so in writing. A companion measure will be introduced in the Senate by Sen. Edward Kennedy. The legislation is strongly backed by the AFL-CIO and by our parent union, the AFT.

It needs your support as well. Tell your congressional representatives to fight for this legislation. The AFL-CIO has made that easy: At [www EmployeeFreeChoiceAct.org](http://www.EmployeeFreeChoiceAct.org) you

can sign a petition and get involved in other ways to build momentum for this much needed legislation.

As Rep. Miller said, "We cannot continue on our nation's current path, where CEOs have complete freedom to negotiate lavish pay and retirement packages for themselves while workers have no leverage to make their own lives better."