

Testimony of Errol Hohrein
Former Front Range Energy Employee
United Steelworkers (USW)
Before the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions
Hearing on
"The Employee Free Choice Act: Restoring Economic Opportunity for Working Families"
March 27, 2007

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, good morning. Thank you for inviting me to participate in this important hearing on workers' rights. My name is Errol Hohrein. I live in Greeley, Colorado. I've been married for 21 years, and we have two sons and a daughter. I served in Vietnam and was honorably discharged after losing a majority of my hearing as a result of an explosion.

For more than 20 years, I have been a boilermaker.

Last year, I began working at Front Range Energy to help start up their \$50 million ethanol distillery in northern Colorado.

Like many of my co-workers, I was hired with the promise of good pay, affordable health benefits and a safe working environment.

Workplace safety has always been a top priority for me. A boilermaker's work environment can be very hazardous. We often work with dangerous equipment, such as flame cutting torches, power grinders and crane operators.

From every direction, there's risk of injury - - and in some cases death. While at Front Range Energy, I began to notice potential safety risks. I went to management several times with my concerns about leaks in the ammonia tanks, leaks in steam systems and the inadequate storage of overactive chemicals. But my requests fell on deaf ears.

I quickly discovered that this was not the last of my problems at Front Range. Despite the distillery's monthly million dollar profits, the company callously reneged on their pledge of wage increases and benefits. It was theft by deception.

We were shorted on wages and to make matters worse, the company's medical benefits were priced at over \$900 a month - almost half of our paychecks.

One co-worker wrote a letter to management about having been shorted on his paycheck, and days later he was fired.

I was a union man for years. In fact, my grandfather, father and brother had all been union boilermakers. I knew what a difference a union could make. I knew the value of coming together with co-workers to bargain for better work standards.

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My co-workers were worried about workplace safety and fed up with the company's misrepresentations about wages and benefits, and they were aware of my union background. So they came to me to ask about how we could go about forming a union. I have to say I was reluctant at first because of how hard I knew this would be, but my co-workers were adamant about having fairness on the job. We decided to organize and form a union with the United Steelworkers to improve our working conditions.

Once the company found out that we were organizing, management began trying to intimidate us, targeting those of us who were active union supporters.

They forced us to attend meetings, where they slammed the union and where we were not allowed to say much. Following one meeting, I was written up for insubordination. They threatened that if our campaign was successful, our paychecks may suffer.

Managers would follow me around the workplace at all times. They would not permit other workers to talk to me. They isolated me from my co-workers.

I used to hand out information to co-workers in the break room, the only place the company would allow us to. One day, while handing out information to co-workers on the union during my break, management ordered me to stop and threatened to fire me.

We held our election on December 18 and 20, 2006 to accommodate shift schedules. On both election days, the plant manager hung out by the break room where we voted, reminding us with his presence of prior threats about what might happen if we vote the union in.

Despite Front Range Energy's intimidation tactics and other efforts to keep us from organizing, we won our union. But for me, victory was short-lived. The threat was real. Within days after the union election was certified by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), I was fired.

I've filed a challenge with the NLRB, and it could be years before I get my job back. But my organizing efforts at Front Range have not ended. My commitment doesn't end until we get a first union contract. I'm now sitting at the USW bargaining table to negotiate. The company is all smiles, but I know better. We won't get a first contract until the Employee Free Choice Act is passed by this Congress with a mechanism that gets the job done.

I'm no troublemaker. I served my country in Viet Nam... I've worked with youth as a high school history teacher...my wife is a special education instructor... we've raised three terrific children. I have one flaw, and that's telling the truth.

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Labor law in this country is broken. It doesn't support working people and we're paying a terrible price for it. No matter what the board rules in my case, I will lose. We're on the brink and no one's looking out for us.

It's no secret that a union contract is the best economic uplift program for working people in this country. What the Employee Free Choice Act does is restore the choice to bargain for a better life for people like me who have been robbed of that choice

Our government needs to take action and do the right thing where working people are concerned. Our leaders need to pass the Employee Free Choice Act. Thank you for letting me testify.

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