



Supreme Court Case Threatens to Divide Prison Staff

By S.L. Muecke

Published in the Walla Walla Union Bulletin on March 1, 2018



S.L. Muecke

This week the U.S. Supreme Court heard oral arguments in a case, *Janus v AFSCME*, which could negatively impact public service unions across the country. As union members employed at the Washington State Penitentiary, many of my co-workers and I are deeply concerned. If the Court rules as expected, so-called “right-to-work” would become the law of the land in all public sector workplaces. Workers will be able to opt-out of paying their fair share in dues but will continue to reap all of the benefits of their union contract and representation without having to pay anything for it.

This threatens to divide us and weaken our union. Our ability to speak out for fair conditions at work, strong protections in our contract, and safety on the job are at stake.

My experience with the dismal working conditions in a right-to-work state is telling. In 2012, my husband and I moved to North Carolina, where I worked as a teacher in the public schools. What were the consequences of that move? I took a \$7,000 annual pay cut, lost all of my health benefits and most of my paid holidays.

The state’s hiring standards were abysmally low and many teachers were underqualified. At end of the day, it was our students who paid the price for “right to work.”

Here in Washington State, my union fights for competitive wages, decent health benefits, and safe working conditions for me and my co-workers. We can hold our bosses accountable and are protected from arbitrary firing. We cannot be “let go” or forced out as we near retirement age. Our years of experience and service matter.

These protections and legitimate “rights at work” are especially important when facing the dangers that exist inside a prison. As a union, we have each other’s backs. Together, we look out for each other and make sure that our jobs are safe and secure.

In Olympia, members of Teamsters Local 117 worked together to extend critical benefits for officers and other prison staff who are assaulted on the job. This allows us to continue to support our families and care for ourselves when we have been injured in the line of duty.

The Washington State Penitentiary employs well over a thousand employees. We are officers, sergeants, counselors, nurses, dentists, psychologists, prison chaplains, clerical staff, maintenance staff, and many others. We put our lives on the line every day when we report to work.

Imagine all of us talking all at once about our own individual workplace concerns. The result would be a cacophonous mess without direction or power. Our union allows us to express our concerns with one powerful voice.

We may not be able to prevent the Court from ruling against us in the Janus case, but we can continue to stand together with one united front and speak with one voice. Apart, we are powerless, rudderless and too easily ignored. Together we are strong.

S.L. Muecke works in the mailroom at the Washington State Penitentiary. She is a member of Teamsters Local 117, which represents 5600 employees at the Department of Corrections statewide.