

Threats to collective bargaining rights and voting rights
Are threats to our civil rights
OEA President Patricia Frost-Brooks
Mansfield, Ohio, May 21, 2011

Thank you for the kind introduction.

I cannot say how much I am honored to join the NAACP for this event today. For you have given me the opportunity to express how deeply I feel that this is a true turning point in our shared history.

Our words today echo with words we used to face our struggles in the past. For those of you who are old enough to remember the 1960s, as I do, you feel those same feelings, you look for those same signs.

For those of you who are too young to remember, well, that's why I am here, and the rest of my generation. For we know if we draw on our past, we will have the strength to survive and to move forward, no matter what they throw at us – apathy, complacency, bitter opposition, suspicion or persecution.

I am grateful to be here today in this sacred cause, and I am grateful to be in this city, a place that tells us so much about our past and our future. I have several friends here in Mansfield who always welcome me to the community. This is a vital community, but like most of Ohio, the city of Mansfield has experienced economic decline and unemployment.

We have wonderful state parks and rivers here. But we can also see the empty lots of Tappan, Westinghouse, Ohio Brass Company and Mansfield Tire & Rubber. It's no mystery that these jobs have gone away and these factories are not coming back. And like Cleveland, Youngstown, Toledo and Dayton, the people of Mansfield want to move forward – if we only have the opportunity!

Today, I will suggest we must take that opportunity and travel with it. We must say, “No, we are not going back – we are moving forward.” We are going to find a new way. We will know how to find our way to freedom, our Freedom Land, even though the way is long and hard.

So let me talk about the year 2011 and why it reminds me so much of a time nearly 50 years ago. Our struggles back then seem so clear to us now. We needed the opportunity to work at good jobs, to live in a good neighborhood, to send our children to schools where everyone would meet high expectations.

All of us have the right to vote. But in the past, so many of us faced long lines, extra questions at the polling place and a choice of candidates on the ballot that had nothing to do with who we are or the way we live our lives.

We became a generation of “firsts.” The first African-American mayor, the first councilwoman, principal, fire chief, police chief and the first African-American woman to head the Ohio Education Association. That's a long way in such a short time, and we nearly burst with pride, hope and a song that said “I'm on my way.”

I'm on my way to the freedom land
Yes I'm on my way, oh Lord
to the freedom land
It's an uphill journey, but I'm on my way
It's an uphill journey, but I'm on my way
It's an uphill journey, but I'm on my way

Our uphill journey continues today. Ohioans don't want to end collective bargaining. They don't want to go back. Thousands of people come from all over Ohio to tell the politicians in Columbus that Senate Bill 5 is the wrong direction for our state.

We always knew we would face a long, uphill journey. Along the way, we have met so many friends. Thousands of marchers and volunteers are working. We hope you will join us, and we hope everyone here today will get a chance to sign our petitions.

Before I go on, could you say something out loud with me as a sign that the people of Mansfield are ready for this journey?

Let's say, We are Mansfield! We are Ohio!

WE ARE MANSFIELD, WE ARE OHIO!

That's right, we here in Mansfield are Ohio – the people who live, work and raise families in Mansfield – We are Ohio.

And we are not going back to the dark days before unions and collective bargaining. After all, for men and women of color – and particularly women of color – collective bargaining was the vehicle that carried us out of poverty on the road to middle class America.

With educational opportunities, we could find jobs as nurses, social workers and teachers. We could touch so many lives of our patients, our clients and our students. We could take pride in our profession and the value placed on our work.

Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton fought for equal pay between men and women, and she noted that collective bargaining was often the fastest way for women to achieve equality. Collective bargaining was so important to the progress of women and minorities. But abolishing collective bargaining will affect more of our jobs than anyone else's. Because we benefit so much, we have more to lose in this fight.

But I've got some news to tell you. We are not making plans to lose. We are moving forward, and we are not about to go backward! No, we are not going back to a time before we had collective bargaining rights – indeed, a time before we had our full share of civil rights promised to us.

It is no coincidence that collective bargaining rights are under fire at the same time as our right to vote and our right to equal treatment under the law are both under fire.

Somehow, in some twisted way, some people still think it is right to question the birth nation of our President. Somehow, in some twisted way, it is some kind of danger to society that those without a state photo ID card can come and vote in an Ohio election. Somehow, in some twisted way, if collective bargaining is abolished, they imagine a world where all our economic challenges will disappear.

That is why we will work so hard and work so long. We will make sure that we get all 231,149 signatures over the next 39 days to put the repeal of Senate Bill 5 on the ballot. We will make sure we gather signatures equal to 3 percent of the voters in 44 of Ohio's 88 counties. We embrace the challenges of this effort to fight for the right of the people of Ohio to decide our future.

Our theme today is the ballot box and the checks and balances that keep Ohio safe and fair. Checks and balances refer to the three branches of government – Executive (the Governor), Legislative and Judiciary. No single branch has all power, so they act to put each other in check, when necessary.

But the Ohio Constitution also guarantees that the people – the voters of Ohio – have a role in this check and balance system. We the people can challenge our legislators and exercise our right to referendum – a citizen veto we plan to use to overturn Senate Bill 5.

If we the people go to the polls in November, our votes can balance the scales of democracy in Ohio. If we win this election, we will know that one-party rule cannot silence the voices of working Ohioans. If we act on November 8, we can put Senate Bill 5 behind us.

Why is this so important? Why have our opponents made collective bargaining the enemy? There are many reasons, but it seems to me that the central reason is that the one-party leaders of our state have decided not to solve our problems at the state level. Instead, they are cutting funds for every school district, every police department, every fire department, every city, county and village in the Buckeye state.

Chaos has followed. Every community must now decide what to do: Do we cut costs on the backs of the very people who serve our communities and schools? Do we raise taxes? Or do we just live with shoddy services and schools without enough resources to get the job done.

So this is not a fight just in Columbus. We are working to make sure Senate Bill 5 will not bring that kind of conflict to every Ohio community. We do not accept the vision of our opponents: low wages, shabby benefits, bad health care, poor prospects for retirement.

Our road ahead is difficult – it's uphill all the way. But we truly is our chance to make a difference at the ballot box. And we do not want the voter ID bill that could eliminate more than 11 percent of the state's voters, the elderly, the poor, our college students and others that will be turned away at the polls.

This is a solution in search of a problem. There is no widespread fraud. There is no indication that hordes of people are impersonating other voters in Ohio. Those cases are extremely rare. This is pure and simple, an attempt by those in power to take away voting rights from those who lack power and influence. But I've got news to share. We fought to get our rights to vote in the 1960s, and we will fight for them again! We are not about to see more hocus-pocus, more lines at the poll, more Jim Crow, segregation and literacy tests. We are going to vote!

Today, I have the confidence that a majority of Ohioans are with us! According to the most recent Quinnipiac poll, a majority of Ohioans opposes Senate Bill 5, and a strong majority do not approve of this direction for our states. A majority of Ohioans believe public schools and community services are the last things that should be cut. So we believe we can save our schools, our communities, our families, our local economies and the prospects for our students if we use our voices together.

We believe schools and students will be better off if teachers have a voice in their working conditions. After all, they are the ones who are in the classroom every day. We believe our streets will be more safe, cleaner and more attractive if we keep our commitments. We believe our community hospitals, colleges and other institutions will remain effective and affordable, if we do our job right. We are moving forward – we are not going back to the way things were.

In this and in all our work, we are striving to fulfill our vision of the OEA. We are not just about our members. We want to be the hallmark of excellence in education. We are about improving our schools every day – both for our members and for our learners.

This means so much to me personally. All of us must nurture our high hopes and keep our dreams alive. All of us must insist that our students work with pride to achieve their goals.

We plan to lead, and we plan to win. We are moving forward – we are not going back to the way things were. Voting rights are civil rights, right? Collective bargaining rights are civil rights, too. And civil rights are human rights.

I have a question for you, though: How many of us can say that our rights are free? No, they're not free? Then we must pay the price, we must climb the hill, and we must move forward. We cannot sit around. We cannot afford apathy. We cannot just talk without acting.

The words of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. must live again in our hearts and make us sing, march and follow the uphill road to Freedom Land. Each of us knows how to find Freedom Land in our hearts – the place where we can work together, vote together, bargain together and live together. Dr. King saw collective bargaining rights as a civil right, too. He said that when one person loses her rights or freedom, all of us lose our rights and our freedom.

In 1961, he spoke at a special AFL-CIO convention: “Our needs [in the civil rights movement], he said, are identical with labor's needs: decent wages, fair working conditions, livable housing, old age security, health and welfare measures, conditions in which families can grow, have education for their children and respect in the community.”

We benefit today from everything Dr. King sought in the 1950s and 1960s, when he and so many of you made the sacrifices that had to be made to win our civil rights, our collective bargaining rights and our voting rights. But we know from bitter experience that old attitudes die hard. There is take-back in the air, a kind of selfishness I have not seen for more than a generation.

We know there are some people who want to put an end to collective bargaining, social security, Medicaid and Medicare, educational opportunity for all and the dignity and value of those who have worked so hard to provide all these things. We know that a majority of Americans strongly reject that vision. And I can tell you that OEA will work to defend our progress over the last century, and we will not accept this vision of the future. And I can tell you that I personally feel a special commitment to you in Mansfield to continue this fight and to raise our voice.

Again, let me thank you today. You know we will face our trials and tests. We know this is necessary: no pain – no gain, no victory without a worthy struggle. But I know you are committed to going forward, and you will keep the faith. Like the mighty oak tree, our roots run deep and wide, far stronger than the bending willow, and much stronger than you may even know. Rest if you must, but don't you ever quit!

Thanks to you, we will never be alone, and I am prayerful and grateful that with your help we can see through all these challenges.

Please: keep listening, keep learning and keep leading. Please keep moving forward, and please sign a petition and vote in November!

Thank you!