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SB 417 - Labor and Employment - Mandatory Meetings on Religious or Political Matters - Employee Attendance and Participation (Maryland Worker Freedom Act)

Senate Finance Committee

February 18, 2026

SUPPORT

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Madame Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to submit testimony in strong support of SB 417. On behalf of 700 affiliated unions, I offer the following comments.

Workers should not be compelled to listen to their employer’s personal political or religious views as a condition of employment. In dismissing a challenge to Connecticut’s anti-captive audience law passed in 2022, the Court held that the Connecticut Business and Industry Association (CBIA) “lacked standing to continue the suit because its First Amendment right to speak to its employees are not impacted by the law.”¹

“Captive audience” meetings undermine the fundamental right for employees to decide for themselves whether to participate in discussions about politics or religion while on the job. Under current Maryland law, employers may require workers to attend employer-sponsored meetings where the employer communicates their personal opinions on political or religious matters. Workers who decline to attend may face retaliation or other penalties that threaten their job. This creates a coercive environment where employees feel they must sit through speech they do not agree with simply to keep their jobs.

SB 417 directly addresses this problem by prohibiting employers from discharging, disciplining, penalizing, or threatening an employee because the employee has decided not to attend or leave the meeting. The bill also bars an employer from refusing to hire an applicant who chooses not to attend this type of meeting. The core principle of the bill is simple, workers may choose not to listen, while an employer may not retaliate. Maryland is not alone in considering this measure; 13 other states already have anti-captive audience

¹ “Attorney General Tong Statement on Major Win in Challenge to Connecticut Captive Audience Law.” Office of the Attorney General, Connecticut. February 2026.



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laws in effect including Alaska, California, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, and Minnesota. This legislation aligns Maryland with this growing number of states and ensures that workers enjoy the same protections already afforded elsewhere.

In 2023, the General Assembly passed HB 984, the Public Employee Relations Act, which prohibited public employers from forcing employees to attend meetings where they share their personal political or religious beliefs. SB 417 builds on this by extending these protections to *all* workers in Maryland.

It is important to note that SB 417 does not silence employers or restrict their speech in any way. Employers remain free to hold meetings, express their views, and communicate with their workforce. The bill simply ensures that attendance at meetings involving political or religious speech is *voluntary*.

The bill does not regulate labor relations, it regulates coercion. It prevents employers from using the threat of retaliation to force employees to listen to their personal views on matters unrelated to job duties. The Supreme Court has long recognized that the state may protect individuals from unwanted speech without infringing on the speaker's rights. In *Hill V. Colorado (2000)*, the court drew a clear distinction between restricting speech itself and protecting listeners from unwanted communication. SB 417 falls in the latter category.

Additionally, federal labor law does not preempt states from protecting workers from being compelled to attend meetings unrelated to their job duties. The Supreme Court has affirmed that states have broad authority under their police powers to regulate the employment relationship to protect workers. *Decanas v. Bica, 424 U.S. 351, 356 (1976)*. Just as states may prohibit employers from firing workers without just cause, they may prohibit employers from firing workers for an improper reason.

SB 417 protects freedom of conscience, promotes fairness in the workplace, and prevents the misuse of employer authority. It ensures that workers can make their own decisions about whether to participate in these types of meetings without fear of intimidation or retaliation.

For these reasons, we urge a favorable vote on SB 417.



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