

AN ACT concerning employment.

**Be it enacted by the People of the State of Illinois,
represented in the General Assembly:**

Section 1. Short title. This Act may be cited as the Worker Freedom of Speech Act.

Section 5. Findings; legislative intent.

(a) The General Assembly finds that it is in the public policy interests of the State for all working Illinoisans to have protections from mandatory participation in employer-sponsored meetings if the meeting is designed to communicate an employer's position on religious or political matters.

(b) Employees should not be subject to intimidation tactics, acts of retaliation, discipline, or discharge from their employer for choosing not to participate in employer-sponsored meetings.

Section 10. Definitions. As used in this Act:

"Department" means the Department of Labor.

"Director" means the Director of Labor.

"Employee" has the meaning given in Section 2 of the Illinois Wage Payment and Collection Act.

"Employer" has the meaning given in Section 2 of the Illinois Wage Payment and Collection Act. "Employer" includes the State or any political subdivision of the State, unit of local government, or State or local government agency.

"Interested party" means an organization that monitors or is attentive to compliance with public or worker safety laws, wage and hour requirements, or other statutory requirements.

"Political matters" means matters relating to elections for political office, political parties, proposals to change legislation, proposals to change regulations, proposals to change public policy, and the decision to join or support any political party or political, civic, community, fraternal, or labor organization.

"Religious matters" means matters relating to religious belief, affiliation, and practice and the decision to join or support any religious organization or association.

"Voluntary" means, with respect to an action, that the action is not:

(1) incentivized by a positive change in any employment condition, including, but not limited to, any form of compensation or any other benefit of employment; and

(2) taken under threat of a negative change in any employment condition for non-attendance, including, but not limited to, the provisions set forth in Section 15, any negative performance evaluation, or any other adverse change in any form of compensation or any other benefit of employment.

Section 15. Employee protections. An employer or the employer's agent, representative, or designee may not discharge, discipline, or otherwise penalize, threaten to discharge, discipline, or otherwise penalize, or take any adverse employment action against an employee:

(1) because the employee declines to attend or participate in an employer-sponsored meeting or declines to receive or listen to communications from the employer or the agent, representative, or designee of the employer if the meeting or communication is to communicate the opinion of the employer about religious matters or political matters;

(2) as a means of inducing an employee to attend or participate in meetings or receive or listen to communications described in paragraph (1); or

(3) because the employee, or a person acting on behalf of the employee, makes a good faith report, orally or in writing, of a violation or a suspected violation of this Act.

Section 20. Right of action. An aggrieved employee may bring a civil action to enforce any provision of this Act no later than one year after the date of the alleged violation. A civil action may be brought by one or more employees for and on

behalf of themselves and other employees similarly situated. The court may award a prevailing employee all appropriate relief, including injunctive relief, reinstatement to the employee's former position or an equivalent position, back pay, reestablishment of any employee benefits, including seniority, to which the employee would otherwise have been eligible if the violation had not occurred, and any other appropriate relief as deemed necessary by the court to make the employee whole. The court shall award a prevailing employee reasonable attorney's fees and costs.

Section 25. Powers of the Department and civil penalties.

(a) The Department shall inquire into any alleged violations of this Act, brought to its attention by an interested party, to institute the actions for the penalties provided in this Section and to enforce the provisions of this Act. In addition to the relief set forth in Section 20, an employer shall be assessed a civil penalty of \$1,000 for each violation of Section 15, payable to the Department. Each employee who is subject to a violation of Section 15 shall constitute a separate violation.

(b) Upon a reasonable belief that an employer covered by this Act is in violation of any part of this Act, an interested party may assert that a violation of this Act has occurred and bring an action for penalties in the county where the violation is alleged to have occurred or where the principal office of the employer is located, pursuant to the following sequence of events:

(1) The interested party submits to the Department a complaint describing the violation and naming the employer alleged to have violated this Act.

(2) The Department sends notice of complaint to the named party alleged to have violated this Act and the interested party. The named party may either contest the alleged violation or cure the alleged violation.

(3) The named party contests or cures the alleged violation within 30 days after the receipt of the notice of complaint or, if the named party does not respond within 30 days, the Department issues a notice of right to sue to the interested party as described in paragraph (4).

(4) The Department issues a notice of right to sue to the interested party, if one or more of the following has occurred:

(A) the named party has cured the alleged violation to the satisfaction of the Director;

(B) the Director has determined that the allegation is unjustified or that the Department does not have jurisdiction over the matter or the parties; or

(C) the Director has determined that the allegation is justified or has not made a determination, and either has decided not to exercise jurisdiction over the matter or has concluded administrative enforcement of the matter.

(c) If, within 180 days after service of the notice of complaint to the parties, the Department has not (i) resolved the contest and cure period, (ii) with the mutual agreement of the parties, extended the time for the named party to cure the violation and resolve the complaint, or (iii) issued a right to sue letter, the interested party may initiate a civil action for penalties. The parties may extend the 180-day period by mutual agreement. The limitations period for the interested party to bring an action for the alleged violation of this Act shall be tolled for the 180-day period and for the period of any mutually agreed extensions. At the end of the 180-day period, or any mutually agreed extensions, the Department shall issue a right to sue letter to the interested party.

(d) Any claim or action filed under this Section must be made within 3 years after the alleged conduct resulting in the complaint plus any period for which the limitations period has been tolled.

(e) In an action brought under this Section, an interested party may recover against the employer any statutory penalties set forth in subsection (a) and injunctive relief. An interested party who prevails in a civil action shall receive 10% of any statutory penalties assessed, plus any attorney's fees and expenses in bringing the action.

(f) Nothing in this Section shall be construed to prevent an employee from bringing a civil action for the employee's own claim for a violation of this Act as described in Section 20.

Section 30. Notice. Within 30 days after the effective date of this Act, an employer shall post and keep posted a notice of employee rights under this Act where employee

Section 35. Exceptions. Nothing in this Act:

- (1) prohibits communications of information that the employer is required by law to communicate, but only to the extent of the lawful requirement;
- (2) limits the rights of an employer or its agent, representative, or designee to conduct meetings involving religious matters or political matters, so long as attendance is voluntary, or to engage in communications, so long as receipt or listening is voluntary;
- (3) limits the rights of an employer or its agent, representative, or designee from communicating to its employees any information that is necessary for the employees to perform their required job duties;
- (4) prohibit an employer or its agent, representative, or designee from requiring its employees to attend any training intended to foster a civil and collaborative workplace or reduce or prevent workplace harassment or discrimination;
- (5) prohibits an institution of higher education, or any agent, representative, or designee of the institution, from conducting meetings or participating in any communications with its employees concerning any coursework, symposia, research, publication, or an academic program at the institution;
- (6) prohibits a political organization, a political party organization, a caucus organization, a candidate's political organization, or a not-for-profit organization that is exempt from taxation under Section 501(c)(4), 501(c)(5), or 501(c)(6) of the Internal Revenue Code from requiring its staff or employees to attend an employer-sponsored meeting or participate in any communication with the employer or the employer's agent, representative or designee for the purpose of communicating the employer's political tenets or purposes;
- (7) prohibits the General Assembly or a State or local legislative or regulatory body from requiring their employees to attend an employer-sponsored meeting or participate in any communication with the employer or the employer's agent, representative, or designee for the purpose of communicating the employer's proposals to change legislation, proposals to change regulations, or proposals to change public policy; or
- (8) prohibits a religious organization from requiring its employees to attend an employer-sponsored meeting or participate in any communication with the employer or the employer's agent, representative or designee for the purpose of communicating the employer's religious beliefs, practices, or tenets.

Effective Date: 1/1/2025