

TESTIMONY OF FELIZA RYLAND

before a Joint Hearing of

The Employment and Workplace Safety Subcommittee
of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee
and
The Health, Employment, Labor, and Pensions Subcommittee
of the House Education and Labor Committee

*The National Labor Relations Board:
Recent Decisions and Their Impact on Workers' Rights*

December 13, 2007

Good Morning, Chairman Kennedy, Chairman Miller, Subcommittee Chairs Murray and Andrews, and Members of the Subcommittees. My name is Feliza Ryland, and I am a proud member of UNITE HERE. Today, I work as a housekeeper at the Old Star Resort, a Disney hotel at Disney World in Orlando, Florida, but for twelve years, from 1984 until 1996, I worked as a room attendant at the Grosvenor Resort hotel. I thank you for this opportunity to tell the Subcommittees about what happened when my coworkers and I tried to win a fair deal at work, and what happened – or more to the point what did *not* happen – with our complaints to the National Labor Relations Board.

Our case, *The Grosvenor Resort*, is a matter of public record. More than 11 years ago we had problems with our employer. On September 27, 1996, after many months of fighting for a fair contract and getting nowhere, my coworkers and I went out on an unfair labor practices strike and began picketing to protest our employer's refusal to bargain in good faith. I was a shop steward, so I knew our rights.

Just a few days later, on September 30, *44 of us were fired*. We continued picketing everyday, to protest the firings, get our jobs back, and get a fair deal in our contract. It takes a lot out of you. But after several weeks, it became clear that the hotel was refusing to rehire us, and it was a hardship to go so many weeks without a paycheck or benefits. I needed that paycheck, that income for my family. So most of us looked for and found new jobs. I applied for and soon found work at another hotel, then about eight weeks after that, went to work for Disney.

Government records show what happened to our complaints about our employer's unfair labor practices:

- In 1998, the judge agreed our employer had acted in bad faith and illegally fired us. It ordered management to offer us our jobs back, and to give us backpay. I did not receive any backpay.
- In 2001, five years after the illegal firings, the NLRB agreed with the judge and ordered the same thing. I did not receive any backpay.
- In 2002, a federal court enforced the NLRB decision. I did not receive any backpay.
- In 2005, the judge held backpay hearings, and ordered Grosvenor to pay me about \$10,000 in backpay. I did not receive any backpay.
- In September, 2007, the NLRB issued a decision reducing my backpay by about \$2,400, because according to them, I didn't leave the picket line and get a new job fast enough.

It has now been more than 11 years since I was unlawfully fired, and I am *still* waiting to see the backpay, still waiting to see justice.

This is wrong. Workers who are fired for trying to organize and bargain for a better life have been mistreated for exercising their rights. It should not take so long to get justice. And the government should be protecting workers, not punishing them for exercising their rights under the law. It is wrong for me to be penalized for exercising my rights while my employer, who broke the law, is rewarded. Requiring a worker who has been fired to look for a new job instantly, without trying to get their job back, is like surrendering without a protest, without a fight. It is like having no rights in the first place.

I don't know if I will ever see that backpay – it all happened so long ago, it doesn't feel quite real – but I still hope that bringing our complaints to the government might help some of my fellow workers in the future by making employers treat their employees more fairly. For that to happen, my government needs to do a lot better.

Thank you again for the chance to be here today, and I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.