

Testimony
(Written submission)
NYS AFL-CIO
Hearing on Public Authority Reform
State Senate Committee on Corporations, Authorities, and Commissions
Senator Vincent Leibell, Chair
250 Broadway
New York, New York
December 8, 2004
10 AM

The NYS AFL-CIO represents some 2.5 million organized workers in New York State. These comments should be understood as preliminary. We wish to hear from our scores of affiliates whose members are employed by public authorities. The interests of a huge number of workers are at stake. The MTA, for example, employs some 50,000-plus workers. They are members of TWU, ATU, Teamsters, SEIU, IBEW, Machinists, TCU, Sheet Metal Workers, AFSCME, and many others affiliated to us. And that's only *one* public authority.

We, of course, support any legislative efforts to enhance the accountability and transparency of public authorities, and to ensure the integrity of their management. It's no secret that a key impetus for this reform debate is the scandal that erupted at the MTA over the last 18 months. We all have seen published reports of "two sets of books," questionable lobbying practices, among other problems.

The bill before us (S.7292-a) is ambitious, but we support the underlying assumption that public authority reform is a matter for the State Legislature. The case that some business voices have argued, namely that urgently needed reforms can only be done through a State Constitutional Convention, is one we have strenuously opposed, and in all likelihood would oppose again. With the present political balance in the state, and with a state constitution written in 1938 near the high point of the New Deal Era enshrining vital labor rights, the likelihood that a new convention would produce a document as friendly to working families as the existing one is slim indeed. In this connection, we hope that the debate about this bill will consider that all public authorities should be bound by the labor rights already embedded both in the state constitution and state law. Public authorities should not be exempt from the standards that our state imposes on other employers.

It's worth noting, historically, the labor movement has been deeply skeptical of public authorities, for they were set up precisely to avoid accountability, and to remove power from elected officials. We do not share the view that removing public policy from popular control is a way "to get things done." When that happens, what "gets done" is usually not in the interests of working people who make up the vast majority of New Yorkers.