The Work Week

Bassford Remele Employment Practice Group

December 9, 2024

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New Year, New Era in Employer-Employee Communications: NLBR Rules on Captive Audience Meetings

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Traditionally, "captive audience" meetings—mandatory meetings where employers express their views on unionization—have been a staple of employer campaigns. However, on November 13, 2024, the National Labor Relations Board ("NLRB") issued a significant decision fundamentally altering the landscape of employer-employee communication during union-organizing campaigns. The ruling provides employers with crucial information regarding the historical context of captive audience meetings, recent changes prompting the decision, and practical guidance for navigating this new era.

Historical Context

Historically, the legality of captive audience meetings has been a subject of debate and shifting interpretations since the enactment of the National Labor Relations Act ("NLRA") in 1935. Primarily, the NLRB advocated for strict employer neutrality regarding unionization. However, the Supreme Court clarified in *NLRB v. Virginia Electric & Power Co.* and *Thomas v. Collins*, that employers have the right to express their views on unionization, provided they do not engage in coercive conduct.

Since then, the NLRB's stance on captive audience meetings has evolved significantly over time. One year after *Thomas v. Collins*, in *Clark Bros. Co.*, the NLRB deemed such meetings coercive. However, this decision was later overturned in its entirety in *Babcock & Wilcox Co.*, where the NLRB, without explaining its rationale entirely, found captive audience meetings permissible. In subsequent decisions, such as *Bonwit Teller, Inc.*, *Livingston Shirt Corp.*, and *Peerless Plywood Co.*, the NLRB further refined its approach,

ultimately establishing the 24-hour rule, which prohibited captive audience meetings within 24 hours of an election.

The Turning Point: *Amazon.com Services LLC*

On November 13, 2024, the NLRB issued its decision in *Amazon.com Services LLC*, which marks a significant departure from the *Babcock* precedent. In overruling *Babcock & Wilcox* and its progeny, the NLRB now holds that mandatory captive audience meetings are inherently coercive and violate Section 8(a)(1) of the NLRA. The Board's rationale centers on the following key points:

- **Interference with Section 7 Rights:** Captive audience meetings infringe on employees' Section 7 rights to self-organization by compelling their participation in the unionization debate, regardless of their preference. This compulsion creates a coercive environment which overrides employees' right to choose whether, when, and how they engage with their employer's views on unionization.
- **Surveillance Concerns:** The mandatory nature of these meetings allows employers to observe and monitor employees, their viewpoints, and their reactions, which potentially chills the free expression of support for or against unionization.
- **Coercive Atmosphere:** Inherent in the employer-employee relationship is the power dynamic between the parties, which, when coupled with the threat of discipline for non-attendance, may make the employer's message unduly coercive.

Practical Guidance for Employers

As a result of the ruling, employers must adapt their communication strategies during union organizing campaigns. The following guidelines offer practical advice for navigating this new legal landscape:

- **Voluntary Meetings:** The decision does not prohibit employers from expressing their views on unionization. Employers can still hold meetings, but attendance must be truly voluntary.
- **Safe Harbor Provisions:** The NLRB has established a "safe harbor" for employers wishing to hold meetings. To avoid a Section 8(a)(1) violation, employers should, reasonably in advance of the meeting, inform employees that:
    1) attendance is voluntary;
    2) there will be no adverse consequences for non-attendance; and
    3) no records of attendance will be kept.
- **Alternative Communication Methods:** Employers should explore alternative and non-coercive methods for communicating with employees, such as distributing literature, sending emails, or posting messages on employee bulletin boards.

- **Review and Revise Policies:** Employers should review and revise any existing policies related to employee meetings and solicitation to ensure compliance with the decision and other applicable laws.
- **Seek Legal Counsel:** Given the complexity of labor law and the potential implications of non-compliance, employers are strongly encouraged to seek legal counsel to ensure their communication strategies are lawful.

Application

The NLRB has decided to apply this new rule prospectively. This means that while captive audience meetings held before the November 13, 2024, decision are not subject to this new standard, all future mandatory meetings concerning unionization will be considered unlawful.

Conclusion

The NLRB's decision in *Amazon.com Services LLC* represents a significant shift in labor law. By understanding the historical context, recent changes, and practical guidance mentioned above, employers can adapt their communication strategies and ensure compliance with the NLRA. Overall, this adaptation can foster a more balanced and respectful environment for employer-employee relations during union organizing campaigns.

The Bassford Remele Employment Group has extensive experience advising employers on new and changing laws, regulations, and ordinances from the federal level to the local level. Please reach out to the Employment Law practice group for guidance, questions, or further assistance. We are here to help.

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