

*Testimony in Opposition to Amended HB 476
Ohio General Assembly / Senate
Committee on Government Accountability & Oversight
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Testimony of Josie Setzler

Chairman Coley, Vice Chair Seitz, Ranking Member Yuko and members of the Government Oversight and Reform Committee, thank you for the opportunity to present my testimony today.

I am Josie Setzler. I am a retired chemistry professor and live in Fremont, Ohio. I speak today on behalf of Tiffin Area Pax Christi, a group affiliated with Pax Christi USA under the umbrella of the US Conference of Catholic Bishops and on behalf of Project Peace, a ministry of the Sisters of St. Francis in Tiffin, Ohio.

I ask you to vigorously oppose H.B. 476. Ohioans need you to champion our free speech rights. The bill seeks to punish Ohio business owners who take part in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement, also known as BDS. Boycott is a method of political expression. As such it is protected by both the U.S. and Ohio Constitutions.

Boycott is a key tool in the use of nonviolence to address oppression and human rights violations. Members of Tiffin Area Pax Christi and Project Peace recognize and honor the long history of boycott in the American political tradition. That tradition goes back at least as far as the 1773 Boston Tea Party, the culmination of a political protest campaign that featured the boycott of British tea. Examples from the more recent past include boycotts in support of civil rights and farmworker rights. Many American institutions participated in the divestment movement that brought an end to South African apartheid. In a lesser known example, Jewish groups joined forces in 1933 to boycott Nazi goods. Most of these campaigns were controversial in their day, yet time has borne out their value for fostering human rights and the democratic tradition that we cherish.

In recent years, these same tools are being used on behalf of justice for Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza. Tiffin Area Pax Christi and Project Peace have worked closely with several religious organizations who have taken public stands in support of the BDS campaign, including the United Church of Christ, the Presbyterian Church, and Jewish Voice for Peace. We look to the example and teaching of these groups as we form our consciences and find our own means to express our convictions.

Editorials and op-eds opposing H.B. 476 have been published in at least a half dozen news outlets around the state. As the Akron Beacon Journal asks, “When was the last time the state pledged to deny public work because of political beliefs?”

I'm also concerned about the amendment that was added just a minute before the bill was passed in the House. This amendment doubled the amount of money the State can invest in bonds issued by foreign governments from \$140M to \$280M. This was done with no public input and virtually no discussion by members of the House. This strikes me as an affront to good governance and democratic process.

Rep. Sprague stated that Israel is the only country which qualifies for the investment of Ohio funds under the proposed amendment, so it will become the Ohio treasurer's option to invest approximately a quarter of a billion dollars in Israeli securities if the bill becomes law. Investing these funds in our own state might make far better sense, yet by virtue of this amended bill Ohioans are stripped of their rights to influence this decision.

This amendment taken together with the anti-boycott provisions of the bill makes it abundantly clear that the bill's true intent is to give unqualified support to a foreign power. The bill's sponsors seek to place the interests of a foreign nation over the interests of the citizens of Ohio. In truth this legislature is accountable to Ohioans and Ohioans only. Members of this committee are obligated to protect Ohioans' constitutional rights, rights of which all of us in this room should be very proud.

In summary, please do not allow the long arm of government to take away Ohioans' rights. Please vote No on HB 476.

Thank you, Chairman Coley, and the committee for hearing my testimony. I welcome your questions.

Respectfully submitted,

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