

## **Three government reform groups testify before Ethics Commission**

On Tuesday, June 16th, three government reform groups testified before the Rhode Island Ethics Commission urging it to restrict the actions of public officials who are union members. The Rhode Island Statewide Coalition, Operation Clean Government, and Common Cause Rhode Island all spoke in support of tightening the Code of Ethics. Currently, public officials who are members of a labor union can act on issues concerning their parent union, if they are members of a different local.

All three groups asked the Ethics Commission to close this loophole. After taking testimony from interested parties, the Commission asked its staff to provide a report on the subject. "Currently public officials can negotiate contracts with business agents who also negotiate contracts involving the public official in a different locality," says Harry Staley of the Rhode Island Statewide Coalition. "We feel this is a conflict of interest because the business agents are clearly business associates of the union member, and to deal with them in their public capacity, an official is in violation of the Code of Ethics." The Statewide Coalition proposed several suggestions for changes of the Code, which the Ethics Commission can adopt without requiring any new legislation, thereby closing this loophole.

"Common Cause believes that this conflict, when allowed to occur, can lead to a direct material gain for a public official, which is in violation of the Code," according to John Marion, executive director. "When a public official who is a union member agrees to favorable contract terms with a union, they can benefit if they are members of a different local when their contract is subject to binding arbitration," he adds, "because contracts from other communities are used to make decisions in arbitration." While not true of teachers, many other unions, including firefighters and police, are subject to binding arbitration in Rhode Island.

Larry Valencia, newly elected president of Operation Clean Government adds, "We have long supported ending the 'class exception' that exists in the Code of Ethics." He goes on to say, "This effort is a first step in ending that, and we implore the Ethics Commission to seize this opportunity to begin a wholesale tightening of the Code of Ethics."