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**SENATE BILL 5417**

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**State of Washington 68th Legislature 2023 Regular Session**

**By** Senators Keiser, Conway, Hasegawa, Hunt, Saldaña, Stanford, Valdez, and C. Wilson

AN ACT Relating to protecting the rights of workers exercising their right to refrain from attending meetings or listening to their employer's speech on political or religious matters; adding new sections to chapter 49.44 RCW; and creating a new section.

BE IT ENACTED BY THE LEGISLATURE OF THE STATE OF WASHINGTON:

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 49.44 RCW to read as follows:

(1) The legislature recognizes that freedom of speech is a foundational ideal that is core to this nation's identity, and it is this freedom that enables working Washingtonians to have democratic representation in the workplace.

(2) The legislature recognizes that currently workers who wish to exercise their right to collectively bargain may be subject to mandatory, closed door meetings in their workplace during working hours in which the workers may be subjected to harassment or implied threats for their desire to exercise their right to collectively bargain.

(3) The legislature intends that workers be protected from retaliation by certain employers when the worker chooses to perform their job duties instead of listening to the employer's speech on political or religious matters.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  A new section is added to chapter 49.44 RCW to read as follows:

(1) Except as provided in subsections (2) and (3) of this section, any employer, including the state and any instrumentality or political subdivision thereof, may not subject or threaten to subject any employee to discipline or discharge on account of such employee's refusal to:

(a) Attend an employer-sponsored meeting with the employer or its agent, representative, or designee, the primary purpose of which is to communicate the employer's opinion concerning religious or political matters; or

(b) Listen to speech or view communications, including electronic communications, the primary purpose of which is to communicate the employer's opinion concerning religious or political matters.

(2) Nothing in this section shall prohibit:

(a) An employer or its agent, representative, or designee from communicating to its employees any information that the employer is required by law to communicate, but only to the extent of such legal requirement;

(b) An employer or its agent, representative, or designee from communicating to its employees any information that is necessary for such employees to perform their job duties;

(c) An institution of higher education, or any agent, representative, or designee of such institution, from meeting with or participating in any communications with its employees that are part of coursework, any symposia, or an academic program at such institution;

(d) Casual conversations between employees or between an employee and an agent, representative, or designee of an employer, provided participation in such conversations is not required; or

(e) A requirement limited to the employer's managerial and supervisory employees.

(3) The provisions of this section do not apply to a religious corporation, entity, association, educational institution, or society that is exempt from the requirements of Title VII of the civil rights act of 1964 pursuant to 42 U.S.C. Sec. 2000e-1(a), with respect to speech on religious matters to employees who perform work connected with the activities undertaken by such religious corporation, entity, association, educational institution, or society.

(4) An employer who violates this section is liable in a civil cause of action for damages caused by such discipline or discharge, including punitive damages, the full amount of gross loss of wages or compensation, and reasonable attorneys' fees and costs.

(5) The definitions in this subsection apply throughout this section unless the context clearly requires otherwise.

(a) "Political matters" means matters relating to elections for political office, political parties, proposals to change legislation, proposals to change regulation, and the decision to join or support any political party or political, civic, community, fraternal, or labor organization.

(b) "Religious matters" means matters relating to religious affiliation and practice, and the decision to join or support any religious organization or association.

NEW SECTION. **Sec.**  This act may be known and cited as the employee free choice act.

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