

The Workers, United, Will Never Be Defeated

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Senator Smith reflects on the importance of union jobs and fair wages to building a strong middle class and giving every Wisconsinite the quality of life they deserve.

MADISON - This past weekend, I was proud to stand with United Auto Workers in Hudson, who are among those striking for fair wages and better working conditions. I was inspired and galvanized to be there as workers stood up for long-overdue wage increases, cost of living adjustments and job security.

As corporate profits skyrocket, wages for workers have not kept pace. Auto workers, who accepted a wage freeze during the 2008 financial crisis, have seen their wages drop by more than 20% in the past two decades when adjusted for inflation, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. They also gave up cost of living adjustments, which are increasingly important as the cost of living soars.

Meanwhile, CEOs' salaries are sky-high. General Motors CEO Mary Barra made nearly \$29 million in 2022. That's 362 times the median GM employee's earnings, according to the Securities and Exchange Commission.

With the successful conclusion of the writer's strike, we've seen very recent victories in bargaining for a better standard of living. As automation becomes increasingly efficient, the workforce is changing at a rapid rate. It's important that worker protections keep pace.



In the sixties when I was growing up, union membership was common. I grew up near the Uniroyal Factory, the paper mill was close and Presto was just a couple of miles north. Many of the kids I grew up with had a parent who worked in one of those places.

Their parents could support their families because they earned union wages and benefits. It was an era where working families could depend on an income that sustained a comfortable quality of life.

The union jobs in our community provided our neighbors with a chance to feel secure in their lifestyle and build Eau Claire's middle class. On union wages, it was possible for a middle-class family to own a cabin up north, to take a couple of weeks off for a family vacation or a week off during deer hunting season. It was common for families to have one parent working outside the home and one inside the home.

This is not necessarily the norm now. These days, it's increasingly difficult for workers to have that quality of life. Between rising cost of living and stagnating wages, often both parents need to have a job outside the home in order to make ends meet.

Children today deserve the kind of childhood my neighbors had growing up, with parents who

are paid fairly for the work they do *and* have time to devote to their families.



But decreasing rates of union membership make it hard for parents to have that time. The Bureau of Labor Statistics found that in 2022, only 11.3 percent of workers were represented by a union. While the overall number of union members went up, the percentage of workers represented by a union went down, as non-union jobs were added at a faster rate than union jobs.

Unionization is about quality of life. By striking for better wages and a higher standard of living, union workers are building back that quality of life we have lost in recent decades. We've got to get it back.

Anti-union politicians turned this state upside down and backwards by gutting public sector unions twelve years ago, and their attacks on unions have continued since then. They say they support families, but won't support the policies that make families thrive. Every worker deserves a good quality of life and the opportunity to make their family prosper.

Work gives us dignity, but only when we are paid fairly for the work we do. We can't afford to let workers fall by the wayside. Rather than continuing to let corporate profits rise, we should compensate workers for the success they helped create with better working conditions, stronger pay and better benefits. We should stand in solidarity, with fairness and equity our goal.

Senator Smith represents District 31 in the Wisconsin State Senate. The 31st Senate District includes all of Buffalo, Pepin and Trempealeau counties and portions of Pierce, Dunn, Eau Claire, Jackson and St. Croix counties.

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