

Andrew Disch: A mainstream perspective on prevailing wage

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Recently a spokesperson for Wisconsin Manufacturers & Commerce [WMC] told the Wisconsin State Journal, “We don’t want to make it too comfortable to remain unemployed.” Currently, the maximum weekly unemployment benefit is \$370. Who would describe \$370 a week as ‘comfortable’? Similarly, the President of the Associated Builders & Contractors [ABC] has cited “inflated wages” in opposition to prevailing wage. Are rising wages on Main Street somehow a bad thing? The perspectives from corporate special interest groups like WMC and ABC are relevant to understand their criticism of prevailing wage laws.

Now a mainstream perspective.

Prevailing wage laws require that construction workers on public construction projects be paid wages offered on similar jobs by local Wisconsin workers. This results in rising middle class incomes for everyone in the State. It is widely recognized there is a worker shortage in the trades and in order for the next generation to pursue these careers; it needs to make financial sense. Should we expect a person who completes a multiyear apprenticeship program and performs physically demanding work in extreme conditions be paid wages so low that they are unable to obtain a middle-class lifestyle?

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Prevailing wage and Wisconsin’s low bid law have held a close association. (The low bid law generally requires public construction projects be awarded blindly to the lowest bidder.) While opponents of prevailing wage frequently mention the “free

market,” certainly they would also agree that the low bid law falls outside of it. When building a house, most consumers conduct some investigation into the credibility of the builders submitting bids rather than accepting the lowest bid sight unseen. That is the free market.

Prevailing wage protects taxpayers against the high costs of shoddy contractors: lower quality, expensive delays, less local hiring and underpaid workers relying on government assistance. It ensures a level playing field among bidders within the low bid system. It holds accountable out-of-state contractors that don't pay Wisconsin taxes or Wisconsin wages. Since prevailing wage's repeal, these carpetbagging shops increased their share of public work here substantially.

Mainstream perspectives support prevailing wage. A recent poll showed 83% of Wisconsin voters support companies who bid on public construction work should pay competitive wages and benefits. Additionally, the federal prevailing wage law, known as Davis-Bacon, receives broad support in Congress. The House of Representatives votes on this regularly and it is consistently passed with both Democrat and Republican support – one of the rare issues both parties agree on in Washington. In fact, former Republican Speaker Paul Ryan was an ardent supporter.

Embracing prevailing wage in Wisconsin reflects our values of supporting the middle class, respecting the taxpayer and standing up to extreme perspectives. It's a mainstream policy that's good for Main Street.

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