

For Our Future WI: Essential frontline workers press for freedom to collectively bargain

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MADISON, WI — Today, all four Democratic members of the Joint Finance Committee were joined by frontline workers from across Wisconsin for a conversation that drew a direct line between the freedom to collectively bargain and better outcomes for Wisconsin communities and families. The discussion took place before the Joint Finance Committee gaveled in to meet in the Capital to continue their debates over the biennial state budget.

Speakers included an emergency room nurse, a middle school teacher, a child care certification specialist, and a UW System professor, each of whom shared stories of resilience working on the front lines in their communities throughout the pandemic. Every speaker was able to clearly connect the lack of bargaining rights for frontline workers like themselves to the outcomes of those they serve.

Kate Walton, an emergency room nurse in Madison described the last year as, “the scariest and most difficult time of my career, because there have been so many unknowns.” Walton and colleagues faced shortages of protective equipment and conflicting guidance about safety measures during the pandemic. As challenging as the work has been, they cited the inability for nurses to advocate for their patients and themselves as the most frustrating aspect of this health crisis.

“No one asked us for our input, even though we’re the ones on the front lines,” said Walton. “Hospital executives and elected leaders have been mostly working from the safety of their homes.”

Ron “Duff” Martin, a middle school teacher in northwest Wisconsin shared examples

of the enormous challenges faced by educators throughout the pandemic, reminding viewers that “teachers can – and do – move mountains for our most vulnerable students.”

For Martin, the connection between collective bargaining rights and Wisconsin teachers is clear.

“Without a seat at the table, we cannot fully advocate for students. The solution is to restore the right for frontline educators to negotiate with our employers,” he concluded.

Paul Spink spends his days ensuring child care centers are safe, and investigating allegations of wrongdoing when children end up hurt or lost, an essential part of keeping his community going:

“The people in my office make sure that nurses and doctors can show up and staff hospitals. That people who stock grocery store shelves or drive trucks full of toilet paper can go to work because they have someplace safe for their kids to go while they take care of their neighbors and do work they’ve been told is essential. We spend our days making sure everyone else can go to work knowing their families are safe and we do it knowing we have fewer rights than other working people. The law shouldn’t work against us. It shouldn’t stop us from being safe on the job. It shouldn’t limit our ability to support our families. We should have the same rights as other working people.”

David Simmons is a professor in the UW System, which has faced the challenge of adapting during the pandemic to deliver higher education to post-secondary students of all ages. As Simmons noted on behalf of all his colleagues across the UW System, “our working conditions are students’ learning conditions.”

Despite that straightforward reality, Simmons and his colleagues don’t have a collective bargaining unit with the ability to negotiate those conditions with administrators. He closed the speaking program with a direct, straightforward appeal, based on the experience of frontline workers denied the freedom to best serve their communities throughout the COVID crisis.

“It’s time to restore collective bargaining rights for frontline workers in this budget bill.”

The speakers were introduced by the Democratic members of the Joint Finance Committee – Senator Jon Erpenbach, Representative Evan Goyke, Senator LaTonya Johnson, and Representative Greta Neubauer.

Last week, Joint Finance Committee Republicans voted unanimously to strike a provision from the state budget that would have guaranteed frontline, essential workers the freedom to advocate for themselves via collective bargaining.

You can watch the press conference [here](#).