

# Melissa Agard: It's past time to re-empower the unions that built the middle-class

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For over a century, Wisconsin served as a model of the achievements of labor and progressive movements, setting the standard for what it means to put pro-worker and democratic values into practice. Our state's once held national reputation as a stronghold of workers' rights is owed in large part to our unions, who uniquely pursued not only direct action in the workplace but also aligned with pro-labor legislators and took their fights to the state capitol – and saw results.

In 1911, Wisconsin was the first state to pass a worker's compensation law, providing workers laboring in dangerous conditions with crucial protections and holding employers accountable for negligence. Just over two decades later, Wisconsin passed the nation's first unemployment compensation law after years of unions pushing for change; and in 1937, the Wisconsin Employment Relations Act enshrined workers' right to organize into state law. Cooperation between legislators and unions, for so long, uplifted the lives of working Wisconsinites and set Wisconsin on a path of building an economy that works for everyone.

Then came the election of former Governor Scott Walker and a unified Republican trifecta in 2010, galvanized by the extreme ideas of the Tea Party Movement, who quickly began their anti-labor assault on Wisconsin's prized institutions. Recognizing the political strength of organized working Wisconsinites that were in conflict with their right-wing, corporate agenda and capitalizing on Wisconsin's poor fiscal situation brought on by the 2007-2008 financial crisis, Walker and Republican lawmakers villainized public sector unions and passed the infamous Act 10 in 2011, severely restricting state employees' collective bargaining rights.

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After their successful campaign against public sector workers, Republicans took aim at unions in the private sector, eliminating the prevailing wage and project labor agreements for state-funded construction projects and passed the deceitfully-named “right-to-work” law, diminishing unions’ finances and weakening their organizing power.

It is abundantly clear that the union-busting objectives of the Walker era came to fruition – in 2010, 14.2 percent of Wisconsin workers were union members, compared to just 8.7 percent in 2020, a drop of about 128,000 union members.

But there is reason to be hopeful once again for Wisconsin’s workers. With the election of Justice Janet Protasiewicz, there lies a strong possibility that Wisconsin will have fair legislative maps – ones where Republicans can no longer insulate themselves from the will of the majority and pass unpopular policy after unpopular policy. And Legislative Democrats are ready to seize the moment and win back the state legislature with their pro-worker agenda.

Democrats are working for Wisconsin, ready to undo the damage done by Republicans since 2011 and uplift the lives of ordinary Wisconsinites. That means restoring collective bargaining rights for public sector employees, repealing right-to-work, and re-enacting project labor agreements, labor peace agreements, and the prevailing wage for building projects across the state. These actions are foundational to returning Wisconsin to its pro-labor past.

However, Democrats want to do more than just turn back history to a time before Scott Walker – Democrats are committed to passing new policies that bolster our labor force and bring us in-line with neighboring states. Workers do well when everyone has access to quality, affordable healthcare and housing, childcare, a livable, family-supporting wage, and the ability to care for themselves or a loved one without fear of having to leave – or lose – their job.

The people of Wisconsin face a historic opportunity to correct course and remake our state as a beacon for workers everywhere. Legislative Democrats stand ready to fight for workers across Wisconsin and build back the progressive labor tradition in our great state.

*-Agard, D-Madison, is Senate minority leader and represents the 16th Senate District.*