

America is Best When Labor is Strong

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With Labor Day just around the corner Jeff Smith writes about the importance of organized labor and unions for our communities.

BRUNSWICK, WI - As Labor Day weekend approaches, summer is beginning to wind down. We're taking our last chance to fish or camp for the season. Children are reflecting on their summer and eagerly anticipating the new school year.

This time of year is always an opportunity to reflect back on my upbringing in Eau Claire and remember the hardworking families in my community. I think about the great strides made in the 20th century because of organized labor. Unions knew the core of their mission is that nobody should live only to work. Every American's job should provide them with the stability to live a comfortable life.

Growing up on the north side of Eau Claire, I had a pretty ordinary childhood. My mother worked hard to raise seven children and my father opened his window cleaning business, which he ran for decades. It was common for families to have one parent working outside the home and one in the home.



Families in our neighborhood were lower-middle income by today's standards. 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 parents who worked in one of these places. Their parents could support their family because they earned union wages and benefits. That era was the height of a comfortable working class that made America prosperous.

Many of the families were able to afford fishing boats, camping trailers and cabins on the lake. My neighbors were able to spend more time doing the things they enjoyed with their families because of their union wages and benefits. My family was not supported by these union wages and benefits and so we did not have the same opportunities.

The union jobs in our community provided my neighbors a chance to feel secure in their lifestyle and build Eau Claire's middle class. They allowed families to own cabins in the resort areas of northern Wisconsin. It was common for a family to take two weeks off for a family vacation in the summer and a week off for deer hunting.



None of this would've been possible if it weren't for the courage and foresight of organized labor in the early 20th century that advanced workers' rights in America. Federal legislation, including the Occupational Safety & Health Act, Fair Labor Standards Act, and Labor Relations Act supported workers, ensuring fair wages and safe working conditions. The Social Security Act was revolutionary, putting protections in place for citizens of all ages. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 made it illegal for employers and unions to discriminate against individuals based on race, national origin, religion or gender.

Although there have been tremendous strides for workers' rights, there is still more we must do for workers in our country. Too many families today need multiple jobs to get by. According to the U.S. Census, there are approximately 13 million Americans that have more than one job, and women are more likely than men to have a part-time job to support themselves and their families.

Union wages and benefits guaranteed most workers would have a comfortable future after retirement. The decline of unions and well-paying jobs in our country forces workers to consider how they'll retire without a pension or 401K plan to supplement their Social Security.



There are steps we can take to support hardworking men and women. We should begin by increasing the minimum wage, restoring the prevailing wage law, implementing paid family and medical leave and repealing the "Right to Work" law.

We often forget the impact of organized labor makes in our communities. Union members before us worked tirelessly to improve working conditions and living standards for all. We can't fall behind.

As we push forward, let us remember working people and the example they set. Economic growth must benefit all Americans, not only the wealthy. Our future prosperity depends on standing up for the economic interests of working families.

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