

Women's Stake in the Battle Over Public Employees' Collective Bargaining Rights ¹

Wisconsin, Ohio, and other states around the country are considering legislation that would abolish or sharply limit public employees' collective bargaining rights. Women who work in state and local government work in fields critical to our communities, such as teaching, nursing, and social work, as well as in jobs such as police officer, firefighter, and janitor. Child care workers and home health care workers also have secured collective bargaining rights in some states.

Collective bargaining helps ensure that these jobs providing important community services also provide decent wages, benefits, and working conditions. Women who are members of unions or covered by union contracts earn more than their non-unionized peers and experience a smaller gender wage gap. Collective bargaining has helped women achieve economic security for themselves and their families. In workplaces across the country, collective bargaining has allowed women to obtain better working conditions. Moreover, when workers in positions like nursing or child care achieve better working conditions, this often benefits the women and families who rely on the services they provide, by reducing employee turnover and enhancing their ability to do their job.

Attacks on public employees' rights to collectively bargain directly threaten working women and the public services they provide.

State and Local Government Depend on Women Workers

Most people working for state and local government are women.

- In January 2011, women made up 56.8 percent of all government workers.
- Women were 51.7 percent of state government workers and over 60 percent of local government workers (61.4 percent).²
- Many of these women providing vital public services belong to unions or are covered by a union contract. In 2010, 40.0 percent of workers in the public sector were union members or covered by a union contract, compared to only 7.7 percent of workers in the private sector.³

Women Workers Who Belong to Unions Earn More

Public employee compensation is already lower than that of private employees with the same level of education.⁴ Attacks on public employee unions further threaten women's earnings, because women who are members of unions or whose jobs are covered by a union contract earn substantially more than women who have no union affiliation.

- In 2010, among full-time wage and salary workers, workers who were members of a union or covered by a union contract had higher median weekly earnings (\$911) than workers who were not represented by a union (\$717).⁵
- Women who were members of unions or who were covered by a union contract earned nearly one third (32.6 percent) more per week than women who were not represented by a union—or \$208 more per week.⁶
- Latina women, whose median weekly earnings are lower than any other demographic group, experienced particularly high financial benefits from union membership or coverage by a union contract, earning 48.1 percent more than Latina women who were not represented by a union—or \$235 more per week. Black women in unions or covered by a union contract earned 25.4 percent more than Black women who were not represented by a union, or \$146 more per week.⁷
- According to a 2008 analysis, being in a union or covered by a union contract increases the likelihood that a woman worker will have employer-provided health insurance by 18.8 percent, while finishing a four-year college degree increases this likelihood by only 8.4 percent.⁸

Women Workers Who Belong to Unions Experience a Smaller Gender Wage Gap

Women who are members of unions or who are covered by a union contract also have a smaller wage gap as compared to their male counterparts than workers who are not represented by a union.

- The wage gap among non-unionized workers was 19.1 percent in 2010, meaning women earned about 81 cents for every dollar men earned.
- The wage gap narrowed among workers covered by unions, where women earned nearly 88 cents for every dollar men earned.⁹

Women Workers Are Targets in Efforts to Abolish Public Employees' Collective Bargaining Rights

- In Wisconsin, the law passed on March 9, 2011, stripping public employees of collective bargaining rights exempted firefighter, police, and state trooper unions. In Wisconsin in 2009, firefighter and prevention workers were 98.4 percent male and law enforcement workers were 81.1 percent male.¹⁰ Given that women make up most public employees even when these occupations are included, the exemption for these occupations means the great majority of workers affected by a repeal of collective bargaining rights, including teachers, nurses, child care workers, and home health care workers are women.
- In Michigan, on March 3, 2011, Governor Rick Snyder stripped home-based child care workers of collective bargaining rights. In Michigan, 94.1 percent of all child care workers were women in 2009.¹¹
- In Tennessee, proposed legislation would abolish teachers' collective bargaining rights. In Tennessee, 80.3 percent of primary, secondary, and special education school teachers were women in 2009.¹²

¹ In this brief, workers are defined as falling into one of three categories: (1) Workers who are members of a labor union or an employee association similar to a union; (2) Workers who are not members of unions, but whose jobs are covered by a union or an employee association contract; (3) Workers who are neither members of a union nor represented by a union in their job.

² NWLC calculations from U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “The Employment Situation: February 2011,” Table B-1 and B-5 (Mar. 4, 2010), *available at* <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.nr0.htm> (last visited Mar. 8, 2010).

³ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Union Members – 2010” (Jan. 21, 2011) *available at* <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>.

⁴ Economic Policy Institute, “Getting the Facts Straight About State and Local Pay” (Feb. 2011), *available at* http://www.epi.org/page/-/Facts_Public_employees.pdf.

⁵ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Union Members – 2010” (Jan. 21, 2011) *available at* <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>.

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ Center for Economic and Policy Research, “Unions and Upward Mobility for Women Workers” (Dec. 2008), *available at* http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/unions_and_upward_mobility_for_women_workers_2008_12.pdf.

⁹ U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Union Members – 2010” (Jan. 21, 2011) *available at* <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>.

¹⁰ NWLC calculations from U.S. Census Bureau, 2009 American Community Survey, Table B24010: Sex by Occupation for the Civilian Employed Population 16 Years and Over, *available at* http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_program=ACS&_submenuId=&_lang=en&_ds_name=ACS_2009_1YR_G00_&ts= (last visited Mar. 9, 2010). Fire fighter and prevention worker and law enforcement worker occupations include supervisor positions.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*