



## Strengthening and Empowering Unions for the Next Generation

### Background

Income inequality in this country is at an all-time high, and part of that is due to declining union membership. A lot of protections workers have today--the 8-hour workday, child labor laws, a five-day workweek--are due to contributions from the labor movement. The middle class in IL03 is working hard every day, but wages have stagnated for decades.

Attacks on unions are growing like never before, with the *Janus v. AFSCME* Supreme Court case and “right-to-work” laws enacted across the Midwest. Republicans continue to undermine workers’ rights, and even Rep. Lipinski is taking action against workers--attempting to take away health care from those who are working hard<sup>1</sup>. We can’t allow our elected officials to side with corporations at the expense of workers--it’s time they look at some statistics.

When unions are strong, they uplift wages for everyone, including non-union workers. After World War II, 35.7% of private sector workers were union members<sup>2</sup>. Data from 2018 dictates union membership is now only 10.5%--a decrease of over 25% in the last 65 years, with most of that decline coming since 1983<sup>3</sup>. It’s no surprise that the decline in union membership is also correlated to rising income inequality, where the billionaires get richer but the people working for minimum wage are forced to work a patchwork of jobs to pay their bills.

Declining union membership has decimated our middle class, and it also causes public health issues. A strong union produces fair wages, enables people to have quality health care coverage, and a union’s political presence empowers its workers to fight for what’s right. Even for non-union workers, “strong unions set pay and benefits standards that nonunion employers

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<sup>1</sup> [H.R.2782](#), 116th Congress.

<sup>2</sup> Wright, Michael J. (2016). The decline of American unions is a threat to public health. *American Journal of Public Health*.

<sup>3</sup> United States Department of Labor. (2019). Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by selected characteristics. *Bureau of Labor Statistics*. Accessed from <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t01.htm>.

follow ... highly unionized states helped lift minimum wages above the levels of states where labor was comparatively weak”<sup>4</sup> (Rosenfeld, et al., 2016).

### **Addressing Declining Union Membership Through Policies**

Corporate executives are pleased every time unions take a hit. I stand proudly with groups that push to unionize workers in all parts of IL03 and across the country. We have to stop letting corporations control our lawmakers and finally fight for the rights of workers. Private companies should have the responsibility of caring for their workers--they just need the will to do so.

#### *Vocational and career training in schools and public spaces*

Too many of our students have no idea about the trades. When I started talking to my daughter about college and jobs, she told me she truthfully never discussed things like pipefitting or carpentry in school.

We need to turn to programs that are already investing in the trades, such as Manufacturing Renaissance and a program at Benito Juarez High School through IBEW. These programs in Chicago allow high school students to become apprentices in the trades and seek employment in a consistent industry--they're already on the pathway to union employment before they have a high school diploma. In order to have these opportunities across all parts of IL03, we must bring together school boards, union leaders, and teachers so we can create pathways for young people to the trades. We need on-ramps to unions to be available at both high schools as well as community colleges and libraries.

Let's also leverage the strengths of our community colleges to access union training, apprenticeship programs, and expand partnerships between the trades and our education system. Currently in IL03 and in many parts of the country, the labor movement is widely erased from history books. When I was growing up, I learned the stories of Mother Jones and the rise of the AFL-CIO. Without historical evidence of the successes of the labor movement, it's no surprise that businesses executives are seeing their earnings grow while low-wage workers are forced into a patchwork of jobs, union membership declines to record lows, and income inequality continues to soar.

To get to a point where unions are strong and all workers are seeing their wages rise again, I propose a shift in how we learn about unions. I plan to bring politics to the local level, because that is where change can be felt immediately. In collaboration with school districts and library boards, we should have databases available at all high schools, community colleges, and libraries across IL03 that help people find access to unions and trades programs.

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<sup>4</sup> Rosenfeld, Jake, Patrick Denice, and Jennifer Laird. (2016). Union decline lowers wages of nonunion workers. *Economic Policy Institute*. Accessed from <https://www.epi.org/files/pdf/112811.pdf>.

### *Labor in management and on every board*

I plan to pass legislation that requires a member of labor management on every board of directors. By growing the relationship between a union's board and its members, working conditions improve, members are more confident in decision-making, and members play more of an active role in their union. A partnership between the board and members creates mutual gains between the two, and this is reflected in both data analysis and qualitative studies over the years<sup>5</sup>.

### *Green workforce training and green construction jobs*

As the economy changes and we push toward passing a Green New Deal, many skills learned in the trades can be easily transferred to green construction jobs. As mentioned in [our underemployment paper](#), I plan to work closely alongside unions to make sure their members have all the skills they need to thrive. By expanding workforce training sites in IL03 and increasing awareness, we can continue to foster business growth and push for jobs that are environmentally sustainable.

Workforce training in industries like solar energy can empower organizations like ComEd, Elevate Energy, the Safer Foundation, and more, prioritizing renewable energy across our state and increasing the ability to thrive for small businesses in IL03<sup>6</sup>. These programs will also increase chances for working families to earn fair wages and excel. By pivoting to green workforce training--and increasing awareness of workforce training programs in general--we can uplift the middle class, strengthen unions, and increase wages and quality of life for all of us.

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Questions or comments about this policy? Please send us your ideas at [info@marienewmanforcongress.com](mailto:info@marienewmanforcongress.com).

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<sup>5</sup> Kwon, Soon Sik. (2014). Does labor-management partnership deprive union members of activism toward their unions? Evidence from union members in Korea. *International Journal of Human Resource Management*, 25(11), pp. 1613-1630.

<sup>6</sup> The Chicago Community Trust. (2017). Preparing disenfranchised communities to thrive in green energy careers. *The Chicago Community Trust*. Accessed from <https://cct.org/2017/12/preparing-disenfranchised-communities-to-thrive-in-green-energy-careers/>.