



UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE FOR STRIKERS

Rather than negotiate a fair contract, employers can weaponize the economic instability of workers — especially low-income workers — to force a strike and “starve them out.” Striking workers and their families should have access to some economic support.

THE PROBLEM



Employers can refuse to negotiate fair contracts with workers, force strikes, and use families’ financial distress as a bargaining strategy. Because striking workers lack access to unemployment insurance assistance, employers can use the threat of evictions, repossessions, and other economic hardships to suppress wages and working conditions.

THE SOLUTION



By approving HB 1893/SB 5777, Washington can join New York, New Jersey and Maine in allowing workers to access unemployment insurance after more than two weeks on strike. This legislation, sponsored by Rep. Beth Doglio and Sen. Karen Keiser, will help level the playing field, discourage economic hardship as a bargaining strategy, and promote good-faith contract negotiations.



The Legislature should level the playing field and allow striking workers to collect unemployment insurance

- **Workers join together in unions to negotiate for family-supporting wages**, safer working conditions, and respect on the job. But some employers refuse to reach contract agreements. Instead, they choose to “starve workers out” by locking them out or forcing a strike. Locked-out workers have access to unemployment insurance benefits in Washington, but striking workers do not.
- **Employers’ refusal to negotiate is a feature of their bargaining strategy, not a bug.** In the recent strike by entertainment industry writers, a studio executive made their strategy clear: “Allow things to drag on until union members start losing their apartments and losing their houses.”¹ It is reprehensible that employers build their bargaining strategy around the evictions of employees’ families.
- **Strikes lasting more than two weeks are rare.** BLS data shows only three major strikes since 2009 lasting more than two weeks which could qualify under this bill. Strikes are a last resort, and no one goes on strike lightly. Strikes can also impact earned retirement benefits, health insurance, and prescription drug coverage. Unemployment is a partial wage replacement, and employers are always better able to weather a strike than the workers.
- **Washington’s unemployment trust fund is in good shape.** We have carefully stewarded our trust fund and, unlike other states, did not take out a loan for UI during the pandemic. ESD estimates that this would lead to less than a 1% increase in UI claims during months when a qualifying strike occurs.
- **It’s cruel to allow workers exercising their right to strike to go hungry, bankrupt, or lose their homes** because they are temporarily out of work. And it’s cynical to believe that allowing workers to access unemployment benefits will encourage them to go on strike. Workers do not decide to go on strike lightly. When they do, unemployment insurance will simply help their families survive. Only a fair contract can help them thrive.

1. Hollywood Studios’ WGA Strike Endgame Is To Let Writers Go Broke Before Resuming Talks In Fall (7-11-23)



In addition to Investing in UI for Strikers, the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO is supporting a range of issues that address economic opportunity and justice. Learn more at www.wslc.org or www.TheStand.org.

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