



WISCONSIN LEGISLATURE

P. O. Box 7882 Madison, WI 53707-7882

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Contact: Rep. Don Vruwink, 608-266-3790

Remember the Struggle of Workers this Labor Day

By State Representative Don Vruwink

On Labor Day we celebrate the contributions that organized labor has made in improving the lives of people across the nation.

Before workplace safety laws were enacted, many manufacturing plants were dangerous places for workers. Accidents killed or maimed thousands of Wisconsin workers every year. Today, tens of thousands of jobs across the nation still pose considerable risk, as witnessed by the death of firefighters battling wild fires in California.

In 1911, the Wisconsin Legislature passed one of the nation's first worker compensation laws, which required employers to provide medical attention and compensation for loss of life and limb.

In 1913, the Legislature passed a minimum wage or “living wage” law for women and minors. The law defined living wage as “compensation for labor paid, whether by time, piece-work, or otherwise, sufficient to enable the employee receiving it to maintain himself or herself under conditions consistent with his or her welfare.”

But Wisconsin’s struggle for decent working conditions started earlier than that. Our state’s first labor unions started in Milwaukee: the Bricklayers in 1847 and the Carpenters in 1848. Other early unions developed in trades connected to transportation, clothing, shoemaking, and printing.

In the late 1880s, the Milwaukee Labor Reform Association advocated for a limit on the hours a person was required to work in a day. At the time, children and adults worked shifts as long as 14 hours a day, six days a week. Eventually, the 40-hour work week became law for hourly workers, and overtime pay was required for hours worked after that.

The struggle continues. Many workers still do not earn a living wage and must work multiple jobs to pay the rent and put food on the table. When employers do not provide affordable health insurance, their employees rely on government or charity.

The gap between the annual salary and benefits of chief executive officers compared to rank-and-file workers is staggering. Studies show that CEO compensation at many corporations exceeds the rate of corporate profits and the average compensation of all workers.

In 2006, CEOs received paychecks 400 times larger than the average worker. This gap was 20 times larger than it was in 1965. The studies show that the larger the corporation, the larger the income gap.

The good news is that reform is possible. Many of our employment laws are the result of struggle and strife by workers who joined together to demand change. On Labor Day, we thank the workers and reformers who fought for – and continue to fight for – employment laws that improve the lives of working men and women across the nation.

State Representative Don Vruwink represents parts of Rock, Walworth, Jefferson, and Dane counties. These include the communities of Whitewater, Milton, Edgerton, Footville, the Town of Janesville, part of the Village of Oregon, and surrounding townships. He can be reached at 608-266-3790, Rep.Vruwink@legis.wisconsin.gov, and P.O. Box 8953, Madison WI 53708.

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