



WORKER JUSTICE WISCONSIN

THIRD QUARTER NEWSLETTER

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Crushin' It Apparel worker Doricela, Executive Director Rebecca Meier-Rao, and Worker Organizer Socorro Cortez having fun at LaborFest!

WJW has had a busy summer and fall. With several worker organizing campaigns, the first LaborFest in two years, and a highly successful Labor in the Pulpits/on the Bimah/at the Minbar turnout, we've got plenty of updates! Read on to see what Worker Justice Wisconsin has been up to lately.

A great way to collaborate with WJW is to host and, more importantly, promote our trainings on how to organize. Many of our supporters have connections with communities all over Dane County . If you think a community you serve or are part of would benefit from learning more about how to organize their workplace, please reach out to Robert Christl at robert@workerjustice.org. We would be thrilled to meet with you, learn about your community, and plan for a training. WJW aims to make these trainings as accessible as possible, and bringing them to spaces where workers already are is important. Trainings are available in English, Spanish, Cantonese and Mandarin.



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LABOR IN THE PULPITS

We'd like to take a moment to recognize our faith allies and community members, as well as our Faith Outreach Organizer, Gretchen Baumgardt, for a highly successful Labor in the Pulpits/ On the Bimah/At the Minbar this year! We had a record 21 faith communities who registered to participate, and five faith organizations helped us publicize the program. Whether you shared our resources, preached on worker justice, or invited a speaker to your congregation, we are grateful to all of you for your support. Demonstrating our collective commitment to workers rights, below is a list of communities that participated throughout the state of Wisconsin:

- 1) Advent Lutheran Church (ELCA), Madison
- 2) Brown Deer United Methodist Church, Brown Deer (Milwaukee)
- 3) Community of Hope UCC, Madison
- 4) First Baptist Church, Madison
- 5) First Unitarian Society, Madison
- 6) Glenwood Moravian Community Church, Madison
- 7) Islamic Center of Madison
- 8) James Reeb Unitarian Universalist Congregation, Madison
- 9) Lake Country UCC, Hartland
- 10) Lake Edge Lutheran (ELCA) Church, Madison
- 11) Lake Edge UCC, Madison
- 12) Madison Mennonite Church
- 13) Memorial UCC, Fitchburg
- 14) Middleton Community UCC
- 15) Orchard Ridge UCC, Madison
- 16) People's United Methodist Church, Oregon
- 17) Prairie Unitarian Universalist Society, Madison
- 18) St. Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Madison

- 19) St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church, Madison
- 20) Union Congregational UCC, Waupun
- 21) Wauwatosa Ave. United Methodist Church, Wauwatosa (Milwaukee)

In addition, we are grateful to these offices and organizations that publicized information about participating in the program:

- 1) Lutheran Office for Public Policy in Wisconsin (ELCA)
- 2) Southwest Wisconsin Association of the United Church of Christ
- 3) Wisconsin Conference of the United Church of Christ
- 4) Wisconsin Council of Churches
- 5) Wisconsin Faith Voices for Justice

Labor in the Pulpits/On the Bimah/ In the Minbar is an annual event, so if you know of other faith leaders and communities that might be interested in receiving more information in the future, invite them to visit our website to access this year's resources, or encourage them to email our Faith Outreach Organizer, Gretchen Baumgardt, at faithoutreach@workerjustice.org.

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CURRENT WORKER ORGANIZING EFFORTS

CLARION HOTEL

On July 11, nine Clarion Hotel housekeeping and laundry workers came to Worker Justice Wisconsin hoping to improve working conditions. Over the course of three weeks, they met with WJW organizers to identify problems, develop demands, and establish a workplace organizing committee. On July 29, the entire committee and WJW staff turned in a petition to hotel management with over half of the workforce's signatures. In it, the workers asked for a raise, the return of their previous holiday benefits, and a cap on rooms to be cleaned during a single shift.

Management called a meeting and three-fourths of the workforce attended. Packed into the breakroom, workers recounted their experiences to management and explained for almost three hours why they deserved better conditions. The negotiations lasted until August 18 when the workers democratically decided to accept management's counteroffer.

Because of these workers' collective action and unity, the entire workforce received a \$2/hour wage increase, three additional paid holidays to use whenever they desired, and a 12-room cap. By organizing, these workers improved working conditions, and you can, too!



WORKER SOLIDARITY FUND



The Worker Justice Wisconsin Solidarity Fund will provide financial support to workers engaged in a workplace campaign. Workers who either walk off the job in an effort to pressure their employer to accept their demands for improvements or who are fired in retaliation for organizing and have filed charges with the NLRB are the fund's target audience. Through the fund, you contribute to collective worker empowerment, creating as much of an economic safety net as possible for direct action on the job.

To donate, follow [this link](#) and select "Worker Solidarity Fund" from the dropdown picklist.



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CURRENT WORKER ORGANIZING EFFORTS

CRUSHIN' IT APPAREL

Workers at a local screen printing company, *Crushin' It Apparel*, have seen success in their workplace campaign, NLRB petition, and are now on the way to unionization.

On Friday, August 26, the *Crushin' It* workers submitted a petition to their employer inviting him to a meeting to negotiate their demands. These included:

- *Cooler working conditions*
- *That management maintain a clean work area*
- *That paychecks be paid correctly and regularly*
- *That workers be treated with respect*
- *A pay raise (and more)*

Rather than engage in a good faith dialogue, employer Jeremy Kruk retaliated; shouting and threatening to dismiss the employees if they did not rescind the letter by Monday. He claimed the document was "filled with lies," despite admitting paycheck discrepancies due to "bank-related" issues. One worker described how temperatures inside the building could reach up to 100F during the day since only one of the building's AC units is functional. To make matters worse, "[the owner] doesn't turn it on because he doesn't want to pay the electric bill," the worker stated. In an article about this topic by the Capital Times, reporters remarked it was "notably hot" inside the shop.

Another experienced screen printer at *Crushin' It Apparel* discussed how workers are provided with no personal protective equipment (PPE) such as gloves and respirators, and are left paying out-of-

pocket. "We tell the owner what we need, and they write it down, but we have yet to see it materialize," he said.

When the employees showed up to work on Monday the 29th, united and in support of the letter, the owner placed them on unpaid leave, saying that unless they recanted their support of the petition, they would be considered having resigned. "I've been an employer in the state of Wisconsin for the better part of almost 20 years, and above all what I can tell you is this is an employment-at-will state," Kruk said. "That is by employees and that is by the employer, and all too often you guys forget that second part." When informed that the rights workers were exerting fell under federal jurisdiction, Kruk became angered and claimed "What you have here is an extortion for money."

This is blatant retaliation against workers' right to organize. Though these workers are non-unionized and are employed in a right-to-work state, they are still offered certain protections under the NLRA. Perhaps the most important of these is the right to protected concerted activity, explained by the NLRB as:

"The law we enforce gives employees the right to act together to try to improve their pay and working conditions, with or without a union. If employees are fired, suspended, or otherwise penalized for taking part in protected group activity, the National Labor Relations Board will fight to restore what was unlawfully taken away."

"Even if you're not represented by a union — even if you have zero interest in having a union — the National Labor Relations Act protects your right to band



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CURRENT WORKER ORGANIZING EFFORTS

CRUSHIN' IT APPAREL

together with coworkers to improve your lives at work."

Worker Justice Wisconsin and the South Central Federation of Labor moved quickly to organize and support a picket for the workers that are effectively facing a lockout from their employer. From Tuesday, August 30th, to Thursday, September 1st, union members, community supporters, and allies alike joined Crushin' It Apparel workers on the picket line.

WJW and Crushin' It Apparel workers have also filed a claim for unfair labor practices with the NLRB to report the owner's illegal retaliation and violation of the workers' right to protected concerted activity. A union election will occur within 45 days of the filing date, and the vast majority of the company's screen printing and sewing workers have signed to join the International Union of Painters and Allied Trades (IUPAT) District 7.

After a picket and a chat with the NLRB, Kruk welcomed workers back without formal stipulations. Notably, he mentioned to Capital Times reporters that they were biased and unable to "do [their] due diligence." "We will no longer be speaking with

you on anything," Kruk said.

The employer has since threatened to close the business, but workers have secured other positions as backup. The union election will proceed as planned, and workers have been strengthening their relationship with IUPAT all the while. Besides attending WJW membership meetings, some of the Crushin' It workforce went to visit IUPAT's union hall and attended a meeting there to exchange with IUPAT members. The NLRB will be sending out union ballots shortly, though a date has not yet been set for the election.



Crushin' It Apparel workers on the picket line



Crushin' It Apparel workers, IUPAT representative, and WJW staff at LaborFest



Crushin' It Apparel workers and WJW staff prepare for picketing



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BOARD MEMBER INTERVIEW: APOLONIO "POLO" DURAN

Apolonio "Polo" Duran comes to the WJW board from the Regional Council of Carpenters/Carpinteros Latinos Unidos. Here, Polo speaks about his experiences as a worker, union rep, and board member.

Polo's parents were agricultural workers as he was growing up, and Polo and his brother often chipped in on weekends and holidays. This experience shaped his opinions and trajectory greatly--Polo says he feels good being able to represent people like his parents. Polo stated that he appreciates the work WJW does, and that the board allows him to connect with workers, organizers, and other individuals in the community who are knowledgeable and passionate about ending wage theft.

"I WORK FOR THE PEOPLE: THE PEOPLE THAT NEED HELP AND DON'T HAVE A VOICE. AFTER ALL, THAT'S WHAT MY PARENTS WENT THROUGH."

Polo also mentions the legacy of Act 10 and the way it still hurts the labor movement today. "I think a lot of people have opened their eyes and realized that without representation, they're getting nothing. I think some didn't realize it at first. They thought 'Now I don't have to pay my dues anymore' because they didn't appreciate what reps and unions do for us." Polo feels that after years after the passage of Walker's infamous legislation, workers are realizing what organizing can provide for them. 'It's a process, not a one-time thing...it's a long process, and a lot of hard work, but we get [workers] wins every year,' referring to raises and other wins that workers have advocated for.

When asked about how others can support workers and Worker Justice Wisconsin, Polo was quick to emphasize the

importance of publicity. "A lot of people don't know the extent of wage theft. They don't even know it happens...Folks see these buildings go up in town, but they don't know what they're relying on for manpower. Some people get paid low wages and don't get paid for weeks, and it's usually within the Latino community." Polo feels that public displays of solidarity, like the one WJW hosted with the Regional Council of Carpenters in July, are essential to raising awareness on the issue of wage theft.

Polo appreciates the work WJW does for this reason. He feels another way to prevent abuse and wage theft in the workplace is through the education WJW does: teaching workers that they're entitled to many rights regardless of their immigration status. "People don't realize what rights they have," he said. "Otherwise, employers will just take advantage when there's an opportunity." Through training, worker actions, and collective organizing, WJW addresses these points and ensures that workers have the tools they need to advocate for themselves at work. "I appreciate the work [WJW does] and being a part of it."

Polo joined the board of WJW in February of this year.

Board Member Polo (left) accompanied by workers and WJW staff for an action supporting local construction workers.





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STAFF MEMBER INTERVIEW: SOCORRO CORTEZ

Socorro Cortez, one of our Worker Center Organizers, actually came to Worker Justice Wisconsin seeking assistance. It was only a matter of time before she became deeply involved, volunteering whenever possible, despite putting strain on her own time and resources to do so. Eventually, Socorro became so involved as a volunteer that we brought her on as a Worker Organizer, and it was an excellent decision! Socorro's capacity for empathy and understanding is exceptional, having lived many of the conditions that the workers who come to our center face. But she came here with experience beyond that of what most workers face. Socorro's upbringing involved lots of union involvement, from her father, to her uncle, to her aunt. Socorro's first memory of participating in a strike was at age 14-15, but she recalls being involved in similar movements since the age of 8. She even reflected upon a teachers' strike in her hometown that lasted 2-3 months!

After overcoming challenges both in her personal life and in an exploitative workplace, Socorro realized that overcoming these obstacles demonstrated the amount of power she had within herself. But she doesn't consider herself different from the people who come to WJW. "I don't 'help' anyone," she said, "I just share information."

willing to learn, and we will give you the information," says Socorro, "But only you can help yourself."



Socorro and a worker smile underneath their masks!

"YOU DON'T SEE WHAT GOOD THINGS CAN HAPPEN UNTIL YOU LET GO OF FEAR."

She encourages those wanting to change their situations to come with a willingness to learn. "Come here, be



Socorro (left) and WJW staff/volunteers had a great time tabling at LaborFest!



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WJW IN THE NEWS

There's been a lot going on with Worker Justice Wisconsin lately. With several groups of organizing workers, Labor in the Pulpits, Labor Day, and more, we've had a busy past few months. Here are some ways WJW has been spotlighted in the media as a result:

Channel 3000 (Sept 5): For local union supporters, the growing shift toward demanding worth in a workplace provides an opportunity to reach people in new ways and continue pushing for better working conditions across the state.

"A lot of the economic benefits are not the product of CEO handouts, they didn't just fall from the sky," said Robert Christl, the program director for Worker Justice Wisconsin. "They're a direct consequence of labor organizing in the 30s and 40s and 50s, which raised the boat and made things better for a lot of people."

"It's an opportunity to think about where the labor movement is going," Christl said. "[LaborFest] brings folks together in an overall festive environment, but it's also a time to be mindful of the fact that this holiday is about struggling for a better world."

Wisconsin Examiner (Sept 1): "[Workers organizing] is something you're going to see a lot more from us moving forward," Meier-Rao said.

Worker Justice, which gets its support from labor unions as well as from faith groups, doesn't seek to compete with unions, she said, but instead to offer the benefit of collective action to workers not yet represented by unions.

"We would hope to see everybody become unionized eventually," she said. But

in the meantime, "we have to see that shift now, so [nonunion workers] learn, 'Oh, we can act together.'"

Wisconsin Examiner (Sept 8):

Housekeepers at a Madison chain hotel didn't have a union and wanted to get the evaluations and raises they had been promised when they were hired. They turned to Worker Justice Wisconsin, a nonprofit supported by unions and faith groups that helps nonunion workers; the organization helped the group win better pay and other working condition improvements, said Delia, one of the housekeepers, who took part in the panel.

Delia, who gave only her first name, spoke in Spanish as Worker Justice Wisconsin staff member Frida Ballard interpreted.

Ballard also interpreted for another woman, employed at a Madison sportswear and screen printing factory where workers complained of missed paychecks and overheated working conditions.

"I was already set on leaving," the worker said. But after being connected with Worker Justice, she and her coworkers concluded that "these are our jobs and we don't have to leave — we can defend them."

After the workers petitioned the owner and were laid off, they filed an unfair labor practice charge with the National Labor Relations Board. Ballard said Wednesday that all the laid off workers were rehired following intervention by the agency.

The panel discussion, held over Zoom, was organized by COWS, the University of Wisconsin center that measures the economy from the perspective of workers. It followed the release last week of COWS'



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WJW IN THE NEWS

latest State of Working Wisconsin report. The report's key finding was that, for many reasons, Wisconsin workers have reached a turning point where they have discovered their potential power to improve the conditions of their jobs.

The Capital Times (Sept 9): Meanwhile, workers at a hotel and screen printing company in Madison have organized and achieved wins despite not having a union. Workers at Clarion Suites at the Alliant Energy Center negotiated new working standards and paid holidays, while laid-off screen printers and seamstresses at Crushin' It Apparel were reinstated Friday after three days of picketing.

Evelia, a seamstress at Crushin' It Apparel who asked to use only her first name, said she and her coworkers were ready to quit their jobs after some of their paychecks bounced and their boss allegedly refused to buy more fans or run the air conditioning in their production facility during the summer. But when they consulted organizers at nonprofit worker advocacy group Worker Justice Wisconsin, they decided to try to improve their workplace rather than leave.

"They told us, 'You don't have to quit. You have rights,'" Evelia said. "Now we know that we have rights."

The number of union petitions filed with the National Labor Relations Board in the first nine months of the 2022 fiscal year was up 58% over 2021, shooting past the number filed in the entire preceding fiscal year. Meanwhile, the Gallup poll has found that approval of unions hit 71%, a rate last seen in 1965.

LABORFEST

After a 2-year hiatus, LaborFest was back in full force this year. Familiar faces included Satya Rhodes-Conway, Francesca Hong, Mark Pocan, and Mandela Barnes. Besides a food and refreshment tent, lively music, and kids' games, AFSCME members helped organize a vaccination tent and currently bargaining UW Nurses had a second stage where they spoke about the state of UW Health and their need for a union.

Accompanied by other local unions and organizations, WJW tabled with information about our services and workplace organizing. Besides this, Crushin' It Apparel workers and WJW staff appeared together for LaborFest's Solidarity Roll Call. These workers have stayed strong in the face of threats and retaliation from their employer, and at LaborFest they stood in solidarity with organizing workers everywhere (see page 4).

Thank you to everyone who showed up, and we hope you had a restful and reflective Labor Day! Check out some pics of WJW staff and workers at LaborFest below!





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WORKER TESTIMONIES

What would you say to a worker who has issues at work, wants to organize, but is afraid?

“Well, I would tell them not to be afraid because look at us. I was afraid but, afterwards, with my coworkers who supported us and you all, it was like the fear went away. And so I say work hard and keep going.”

“Work hard and know that everything will work out. If you want it enough, you can do it. And thanks to your help... one feels more secure and that it’s possible.”

“Don’t be afraid. It’s normal to be afraid and nervous, but [organizing] is normal and [the fear] is there at the beginning but then it disappears.”

“Cheer up and don’t be afraid. In the beginning, it’s nerve wracking because what will the bosses think, and it depends on your relationship with your bosses, but don’t be afraid. There is always a solution, talking about things you get to know people.”

How did you feel when this whole process began? How do you feel now?

“I was nervous. I didn’t know what was going to happen and all that. But now we feel calm.”

“I felt a little nervous because I didn’t really know you, but getting to know you and learning about the kind of people you are I feel very secure and confident.”

“I felt nervous, scared, but now I don’t feel that way. I no longer feel that fear I had, I feel more confident in the process that is moving forward.”

“I felt good. I felt assured that something had to be done, that we would achieve something. And, thank God, we achieved something—not what was hoped for—but we had some wins. So, right now, I feel good.”

OCTOBER WORKER MEMBERSHIP MEETING

Our October Worker Membership Meeting will be Wednesday, October 19th, at 5pm (at the Labor Temple). Membership Meetings occur on the third Wednesday of the month.



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WORKER JUSTICE WISCONSIN

STAFF AND BOARD

STAFF

Rebecca Meier-Rao — *Executive Director*

Robert Christl — *Program Director*

Katrina Woods — *Business Manager*

Frida Ballard — *Worker Organizer*

Socorro Cortez — *Worker Organizer*

Gretchen Baumgardt — *Faith Outreach Coordinator*

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