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The State of WORKING WISCONSIN 2025

Authors: Laura Dresser, Joel Rogers, and Leslie Vasquez

THE STATE OF WORKING WISCONSIN *presents the workers' perspective on the economy in the state: what's going on with work and jobs, who is winning in this economy, and who is being left out.*

Acknowledgments

The State of Working Wisconsin 2025 is written by Laura Dresser, Joel Rogers, and Leslie Vasquez. We would also like to thank the Economic Policy Institute (EPI) in Washington, D.C. for their support with data and analysis.

About the High Road Strategy Center

High Road Strategy Center is a nonprofit think-and-do tank, based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, that promotes "high road" solutions to social problems. These treat shared growth and opportunity, environmental sustainability, and resilient democratic institutions as necessary and achievable complements in human development. Through our various projects, we work with communities around the country to promote innovation and the implementation of high road policy and practice. Our work is nonpartisan but values-based. We seek a world of equal opportunity and security for all.

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Key Facts

Wisconsin's 2024 median wage – $25.01 per hour – reached a record high.

For the second year in a row, real wages (which take inflation into account) rose relatively quickly (up $1.40 per hour in the last two years).

Wisconsin's jobs are growing half as fast as the national rate and 2025 growth has been weak.

Wisconsin has 2% more jobs than before the pandemic. Growing twice as fast, the nation has 5% more jobs. Wisconsin added just 1400 jobs per month in 2025.

Federal policies – pro-tariff, anti-immigrant, and anti-worker – are reshaping the economy, and Wisconsin workers will pay the price.

Tariffs increase prices, hostility toward immigrants hobbles labor market growth, and federal cuts to health care and other supports will hit Wisconsin's low-wage workers particularly hard.

Wisconsin's workers are losing the protection of unions at a rate that outstrips national and neighboring states.

In Wisconsin, union coverage collapsed from 14% to 7% from 2011-24. Over the same period, national unionization fell from 13% to 11%.

Immigrant workers make massive contributions to the Wisconsin economy.

Wisconsin's 300,000 immigrants make up 7% of the state's workforce, generate $23 billion in economic output, and contribute in every sector of our economy.

INTRODUCTION

CHAOTIC AND ANTI-WORKER FEDERAL POLICY IS UNDERMINING WORKING WISCONSIN.

Workers' perspective on the Wisconsin economy.

Since 1996, in celebration of Labor Day and Wisconsin workers, the High Road Strategy Center has released the State of Working Wisconsin. Our annual report analyzes the most recent data available on wages, jobs, and unions to provide clear information on the economy as experienced by the working people of the state.

Our 2025 report lands at an extraordinary time for working Wisconsin. Economic growth, which began as the recovery from pandemic shutdowns, continues, and key economic indicators are solid. Wisconsin has a growing number of jobs, sustained low unemployment, and wages are rising. The state's median wage grew to a record high of $25.01 and our labor market reached a record of 3,058,500 jobs in July. There are hints of economic troubles especially in the jobs data – job growth in 2025 has been weak (averaging just 1400 jobs per month). Wisconsin's economic softening mirrors the issues at a national level where many analysts are warning of a slow down or even a recession.

Wisconsin's short-term economic strengths mask deep problems of inequality and job quality. The state economy is riddled with inequalities by geography, race, education and gender. Work doesn't guarantee access to decent pay, predictable schedules, health insurance, and a decent standard of living for families, especially for the state's lowest wage workers. These workers have made gains over the past five years but still face impossible choices making ends meet. By building the collective voice of workers, unions improve wages and working conditions. However, Wisconsin state policies have undermined unions, and despite increasing interest and support for them, the rate of unionization continues to fall.

Massive disruption in federal policy defines this moment for working Wisconsin as much as the data. Changes include the economic chaos of a volatile tariff regime, aggressive hostility toward immigrant workers, the nation's largest instance of union-busting, the announcement of a dizzying array of anti-worker policies, and dramatic cuts to programs that support lower wage workers. Even the federal data itself has come under attack by the administration. Working people in Wisconsin will pay the price of many of these policies and given their importance, we document them in a special Federal Policy feature this year.

JOBS

LABOR MARKET REACHES A NEW HIGH BUT 2025 JOB GROWTH IS WEAK.

The total number of jobs in the state reached new highs in 2025. Since January, the state has added an average of 1400 jobs each month – growth, but relatively weak. In July, the state reached a record high of 3,058,500 jobs.

Unemployment in the state, 3.1% in July, remains very low. The rate has been under 3.5% since September of 2021, though it has drifted upward from the unprecedented 2.6% lows in early 2023.

The jobs and unemployment data are strong, but the economy is cooling off after the rapid recovery from pandemic shutdowns.

Still, the relatively strong economy is good news for workers. Sustained job growth and low unemployment rates increase workers' bargaining power. Workers can seek out better work and leave their jobs for better opportunities, or they can use the credible threat of leaving to secure improvements in the jobs they hold. Job growth and low unemployment increase the power of workers, and the sustained recovery from the pandemic has been good for workers.

Wisconsin also continues to have a relatively high labor force participation rate – 66.4% of working age people in Wisconsin are in the labor market compared to the national rate of 62.6%. Wisconsin's engagement with work is above national levels for both women and men.

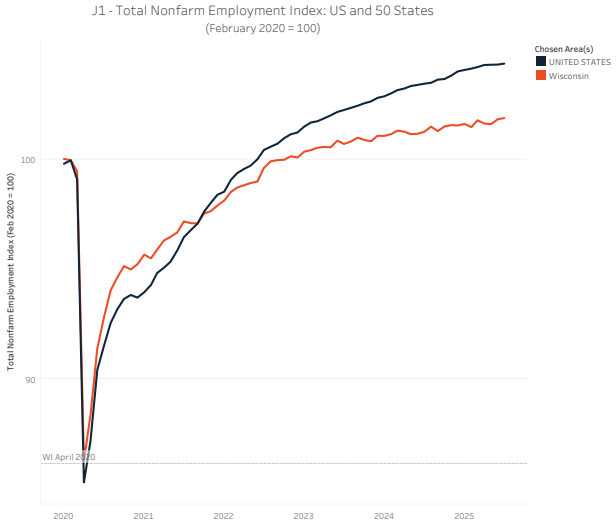
While economic opportunity is steady, it is distributed unequally. Racial and geographic disparities are pronounced. Wisconsin's well-documented racial disparity remains substantial and gravely concerning. Black workers in the state are more than twice as likely to be unemployed as white workers. Geographically, the county unemployment rates across the state are quite disparate ranging from a low of 2.3 (Lafayette County) to a high of 5.1 (Menominee County). Again, that is a substantial gap, but it is also the lowest disparity separating high and low unemployment counties in Wisconsin since data has been available in 1990.

The nation has added fewer jobs than expected across the summer, and analysts are increasingly concerned that the slowdown foreshadows a recession. Prices also continue to rise with inflation at 2.7% in July. While this is just slightly above inflation of a year ago, there are troubling signs that consumer prices are rising which may be related to tariffs.

Workers have gained from the strong economy. For workers, the warning signs and the brewing economic storm of tariffs, immigration crackdowns, and federal disinvestment are especially concerning. While the current labor market is solid, these substantial disruptions may not only slow our overall economic growth, but also reduce the power of working people, as opportunities become more scarce.

WISCONSIN JOBS HIT ANOTHER RECORD HIGH

J1 shows that jobs in Wisconsin and the U.S. reached new highs in July.

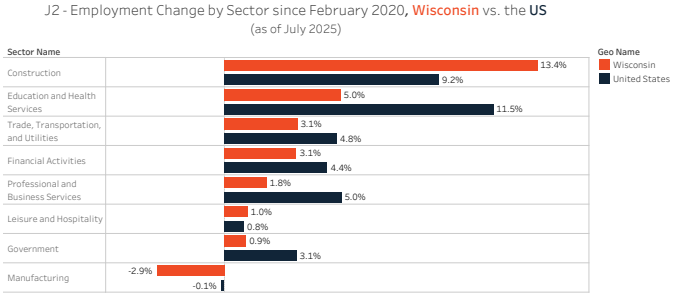


Source: Own calculations based on data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Employment Statistics (CES) program.

In July 2025, federal data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics showed that Wisconsin posted a record breaking number of jobs: 3,058,500. The Wisconsin job market grew by 20,200 over the past year.

Wisconsin's jobs growth substantially lags the pace of national recovery. J1 shows the trajectory of job recovery for Wisconsin and the nation. Wisconsin's labor market growth has lagged the national rate since September 2021. The national economy reached the pre-pandemic jobs threshold before Wisconsin did and continues to grow more rapidly. In July 2025, the nation had nearly 5% more jobs than it did before the pandemic shutdowns (in February 2020). Wisconsin added just 2% to the labor market during the same period.

J2 shows sectors recovering to pre-pandemic levels but lagging national pace.



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of Local Area Unemployment Statistics data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics

Wisconsin's relatively slow jobs growth is clear in J2. The rate of growth in Wisconsin's key sectors is below national levels for every single sector except construction (Wisconsin up by 13%, compared to a national increase of 9%). The lagging Wisconsin rate of growth is especially clear in education and health services where Wisconsin added just 5% while nationally jobs grew by 12%, more than twice as fast. The national pace of growth is also more than twice as fast in the professional and business services sector where Wisconsin has added only 2% while nationally jobs in the sector are up 5%.

Trends in Wisconsin's manufacturing sector are especially disturbing. In July 2025, Wisconsin had 3% fewer manufacturing jobs than it did before the pandemic shutdowns. The U.S. manufacturing sector fell just barely short of the 2020 level in July. Neither the Wisconsin losses nor the national stagnation suggest that a manufacturing renaissance is yet emerging.

The administration argues that new tariffs will rebuild U.S. manufacturing. Obviously it is too early to observe the impact of the policies, but, as documented by Menzie Chinn, neither the balance of trade nor the trend in manufacturing have changed meaningfully since "Liberation Day" in April, when tariffs were announced. Additionally, we are skeptical of the longer-term prospects of tariffs rebuilding Wisconsin's manufacturing base. The Economic Policy Institute takes on the question below.

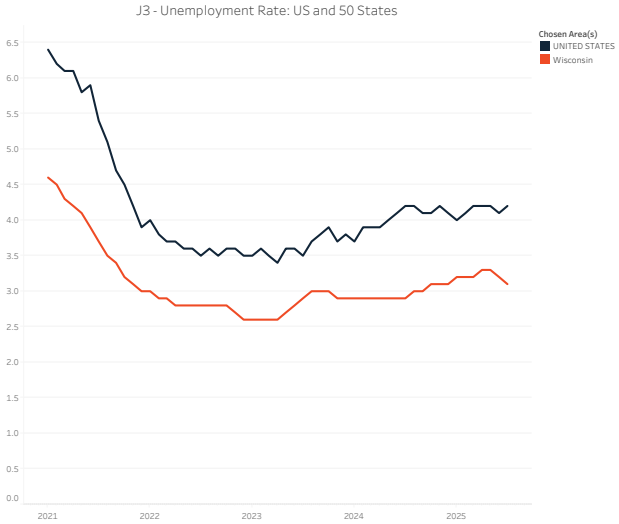
Can high and broad-based tariffs fix the U.S. trade deficit or rebuild manufacturing employment?

"**No**, mostly because high and broad-based tariffs will also reduce exports along with imports, and this will leave the balance of trade mostly unchanged. Exports fall when tariffs are introduced for a number of reasons. The first is that many U.S. exports use imports as intermediate inputs to final goods produced in the United States. Making these inputs more expensive with tariffs will boost the price of these U.S. exports and make them less competitive in global markets. Second, trading partners are highly likely to retaliate to U.S. tariffs with tariffs of their own, making exports more expensive in international markets—which we've seen on "Made in America" goods from Boeing airplanes to Kentucky bourbon. And finally, tariffs will put upward pressure on the value of the U.S. dollar in global markets, which will make our exports more expensive and will increase the attractiveness of imports to U.S. customers—primary causes of U.S. trade deficits and manufacturing job losses."

From EPI, Tariffs: *Everything you Need to Know but were Afraid to Ask*

VERY LOW UNEMPLOYMENT HELPS WORKERS IMPROVE JOBS

J3. Unemployment Rate, Wisconsin and U.S., January 2021 – July 2025



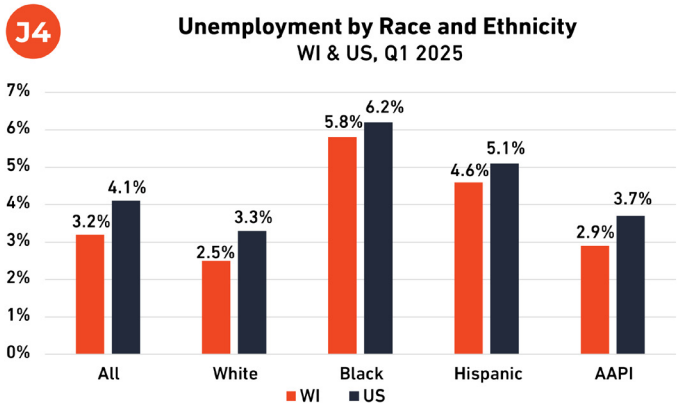
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Employment Statistics (CES) program.

Over the last two years, Wisconsin's unemployment has hovered at levels just slightly above 3%. Current unemployment is slightly higher than the historic lows set in 2023. J3 makes clear that Wisconsin's unemployment rate is consistently below the national rate. While Wisconsin has seen a slight uptick from the low of 2.6% set in February and March of 2023, unemployment remains well below previous decades. Since September 2021, unemployment has stayed under 3.5%, and in July 2025 the unemployment rate was just 3.1%.

Sustained low unemployment rates are good news for those who are looking for work since job seekers face less competition for available jobs. But it also benefits all workers. Low unemployment rates provide workers stronger leverage at work. They allow workers to seek better pay and working conditions in the jobs they hold or provide them a sense of opportunity as they consider their options. With another year of very low unemployment, workers have had another year of higher security, and this helps them in their search for better pay, schedules, and benefits.

DISPARITY IN UNEMPLOYMENT BY RACE AND GEOGRAPHY

Racial disparities in Wisconsin's unemployment are substantial, with Black and Brown workers much more likely to be unemployed than whites in the state. The disparity between Black and white workers has been extreme, and we have documented the high level of disparity, especially in unemployment in previous editions of the State of Working Wisconsin. (See *Race in the Heartland* for a summary of Wisconsin's extreme racial disparity.)

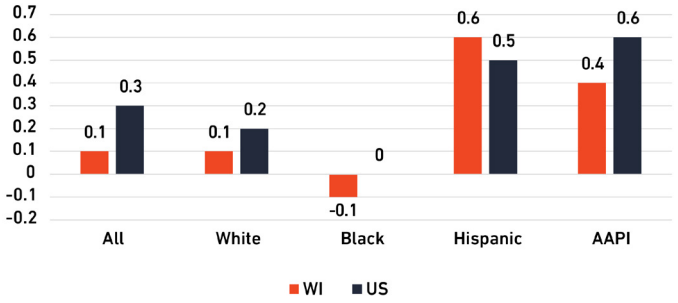


Source: Economic Policy Institute. 2025. State of Working America Data Library, Version 2025.7.17. https://data.epi.org.

Disparity in unemployment is evident in J4, which provides estimates of unemployment rates racial and ethnic categories in the first three months of 2025 (Q1 2025). In Wisconsin, the white unemployment rate just 2.5% is the lowest with the Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders at 2.9%. Unemployment is more than twice as high for Black workers: 5.8%. For Hispanics, the unemployment rate of 4.6% is also substantially higher than the white rate.

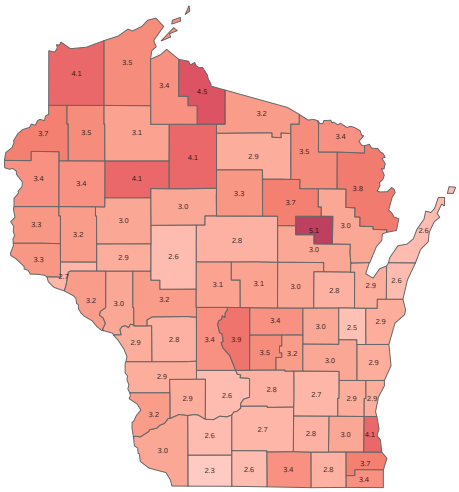
For decades, Black workers have been well over twice as likely to be unemployed as white workers in the state, and this ratio in Wisconsin has always substantially exceeded the national ratio of disparity. In 2023, with strong job employment growth among Black workers, Wisconsin saw the Black-white unemployment gap begin to close, even outpacing the national trend. Progress on the Black/white unemployment gap stalled out over the last two years. The unemployment rates of Hispanic and Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders are growing much faster than white and Black rates as shown in J5.

J5 **Change in unemployment rates by race and ethnicity**
WI & US, Q1 2020 to Q1 2025



Source: EPI analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS) data and Current Population Survey (CPS) data. https://www.epi.org/indicators/state-unemployment-race-ethnicity/

Unemployment Rate by County in Wisconsin
(in %, as of June 2025)



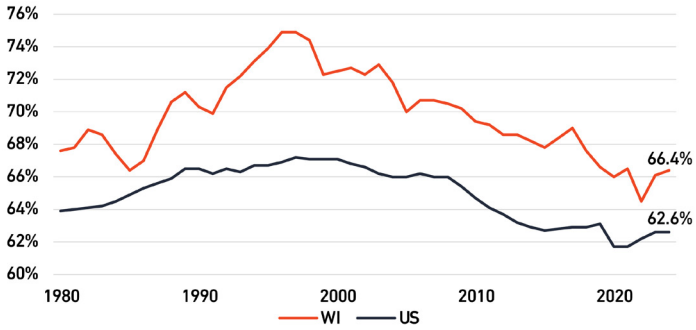
Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Local Area Labor Statistics (LAUS) program.

Opportunity and unemployment show geographic variation easily seen in the distribution of county unemployment rates. In June 2025, unemployment in the state ranged from a low in Lafayette County of 2.3% to a high in Menominee County of 5.1%. Twenty-eight of Wisconsin's 72 counties had unemployment below 3%, which is extremely low unemployment. Menominee County's unemployment rate is more than twice that of Lafayette County's rate, which is a substantial disparity. But Menominee County, which has historically seen among the worst unemployment rates for any county in the state, is posting historic lows of unemployment. Sustained low unemployment appears to be decreasing the geographic disparities in unemployment rates.

WISCONSINITES ARE COMMITTED TO WORK

Wisconsin's labor force participation rate is consistently and substantially higher than the national level.

J7 **Labor Force Participation**
WI & US, 1979-2024



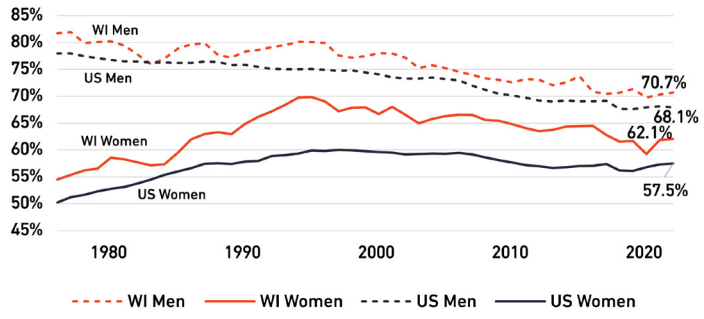
Source: Economic Policy Institute. 2025. State of Working America Data Library, Version 2025.7.17. https://data.epi.org..

Wisconsin's commitment to work is evident in the share of working age people in the labor force, the "labor force participation rate." J7 compares labor force participation in the U.S. and Wisconsin from 1979 to 2024. Wisconsinites have consistently shown a stronger attachment to work, with the state's 2024 labor force participation rate at 66.4% compared to the national rate of 62.6%.

WOMEN IN WISCONSIN ARE ESPECIALLY COMMITTED TO WORK

Over the last 40 years, men's labor force participation has been declining while women's participation rose substantially from 1979-1999 and then drifted down in recent years.

J8 **Labor Force Participation by Gender**
WI & US, 1978-2024



Source: Economic Policy Institute. 2025. State of Working America Data Library, Version 2025.7.17. https://data.epi.org.

J8 shows that while Wisconsin reflects those national trends, workers in the state – both men and women – have historically shown greater connection to work. In 2024, 71% of Wisconsin's men participated in the labor force (higher than the national 68% rate).

Wisconsin women's labor force participation is also consistently above national rates of participation: Nearly 62% of Wisconsin women worked in 2024, compared to 58% of women nationally.

WAGES

WAGES MATTER

For Wisconsin's 3 million workers, wages are the most important measure of job quality.

In this chapter, we provide analysis of wages and wage trends to offer insight on job quality and economic inequality in the state. Trends in wages over time show how workers are doing and whether wages are keeping up with the cost of living. The 2024 median wage analyses provide some very good news – the state's median wage reached $25.01, just above the last high in inflation-adjusted wages set in 2021. Still, there are substantial disparities in wages based on race, gender, ethnicity, and education. We offer analysis of wage inequality in the state and how it is changing.

This section draws on the most recent data available from the U.S. Current Population Survey, providing median hourly wages through 2024. Throughout the chapter, we take inflation into account by reporting all values in 2024 dollars. This inflation adjustment provides a view of wages in terms of consistent purchasing power. Our data covers all workers in the state, those who are paid hourly wages and those who earn salaries. For salary earners, hourly wages are calculated by dividing earnings by hours of work. Throughout, we offer analysis of median hourly wages (the wage for the worker at the middle of the wage distribution) to provide the perspective from the center of Wisconsin's labor market.

To start the chapter, we ground our discussion in a very long-term view of wage dynamics. Since the 1970s, economic growth and worker well-being have diverged. Though productivity is growing rapidly, workers' wages have grown much more slowly. This long-term picture provides a foundation for considering the current wage, long-term trends in wages, for all workers and for key demographic groups. We close by focusing on wages trends from 2019-2024.

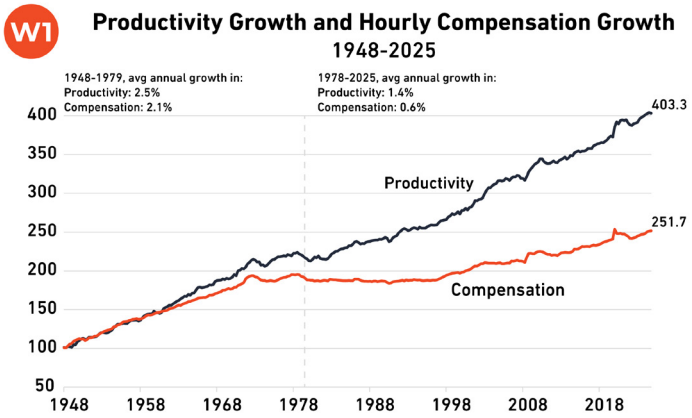
THE DIVERGENCE BETWEEN ECONOMIC GROWTH AND WAGES

W1 shows that despite substantial productivity and education advances over the last four decades, median wages have only slightly increased for workers.

In the State of Working Wisconsin, we have long documented concerning long-term trends in workers' wages and growing inequality. The underlying problem is shown in W1: despite substantial productivity and education advances over the last four decades, compensation growth has been slow. Workers do not experience enough of the rewards of economic growth.

This last four decades contrasts starkly with the period from the end of World War II to the 1970s. During that time, median wages were closely linked to economic growth. As the economy grew and productivity increased, workers' wages grew at roughly the same rate. This was an era of "shared prosperity" when progress paid off for working people.

By the late 1970s, productivity and wage growth diverged. Since 1979, productivity is up nearly 86% while workers hourly pay has increased by just 32%. Despite strong wage growth over nearly half a century, economic growth has not translated into widely shared prosperity and working people have been left behind.



Source: Economic Policy Institute, "Productivity growth and hourly compensation growth, 1948–2025," https://www.epi.org/productivity-pay-gap/

MEDIAN WAGES IN WISCONSIN REACHES NEW HIGH OF $25 PER HOUR

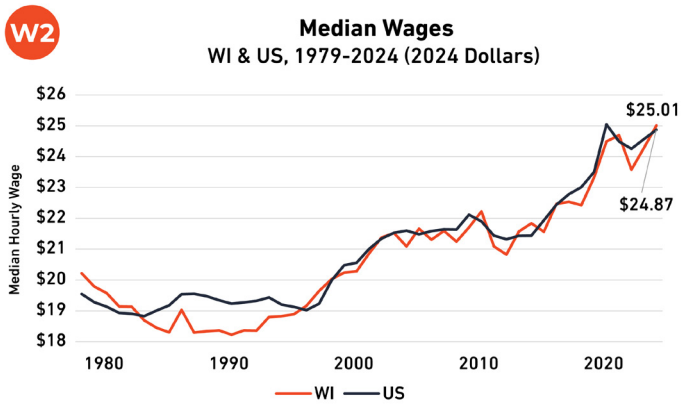
W2 displays median hourly wages for Wisconsin and the United States from 1979 to 2024. Wages have reached a new high. (By adjusting for inflation and expressing all values in 2024 dollars, we can compare the actual purchasing power of wages over time.)

In 2024, Wisconsin's median wage – $25.01 per hour – reached a new high above the previous high set in 2021. Workers in the state have experienced two years of solid wage growth that have more than made up for the damage to wages inflicted by the very high inflation of 2022. The 2024 Wisconsin median wage is just slightly above the national median (which is unusual but not unprecedented (see W2)).

The long-term view provided by W2 shows how remarkable the last decade of wage growth has been. Wisconsin workers actually lost ground in the 1980s with wages falling to well below the national median. Wisconsin began to make up the wage loss and finally got ahead of the 1979 median wage toward the end of the growth of the 1990s.

In the early 2000s, wages were stagnant and the Great Recession brought wages to the 21st century's low point in 2012. Wages grew slowly from 2012 until 2018 during the sluggish recovery from the Great Recession.

Since 2018, however, wage growth has been strong. While high inflation in 2022 brought wages down, wages grew in both 2023 and 2024 and, as a result, the median wage has reached a record high.

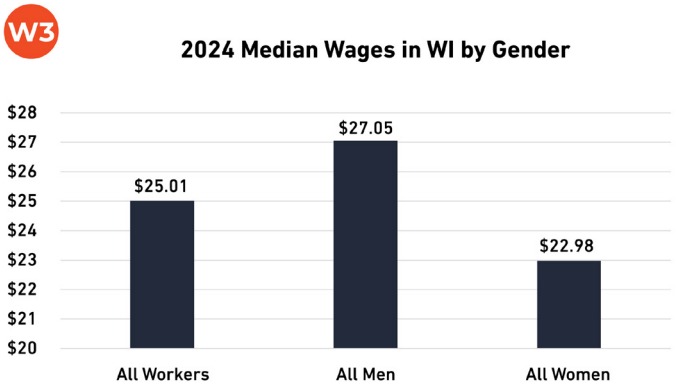


Source: Economic Policy Institute. 2025. State of Working America Data Library, Version 2025.7.17. https://data.epi.org.

2024 WAGE DISPARITY IN WORKING WISCONSIN

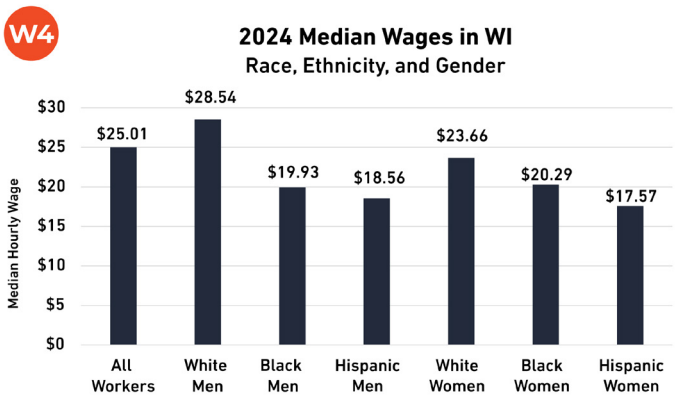
The median wage for all workers fails to capture the whole story of working people's wages in Wisconsin. Women workers, Black workers, and Hispanic workers all face considerable wage disadvantages.

There is a stark gender gap between men's and women's wages. In 2024, men's median wage – $27.05 – exceeded women's median of $22.97 by more than $4 per hour. Men's wages are 15% higher than women's wages.



Source: Economic Policy Institute. 2025. State of Working America Data Library, Version 2025.7.17. https://data.epi.org.

W4 illustrates the stark difference in wages based on race, ethnicity, and gender in Wisconsin and the U.S.



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of 1979-2024 Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau

With a median wage of $28.54 per hour, white men have the highest wages. White women earned about 17% less than white men at $23.66 per hour. Black men and women earned roughly the same hourly median wage of $19.93 and $20.29 respectively, about 29% less than white men. Hispanic men earned $18.56 while Hispanic women earned $17.57. These wages are 35% and 38% lower than white men's median.

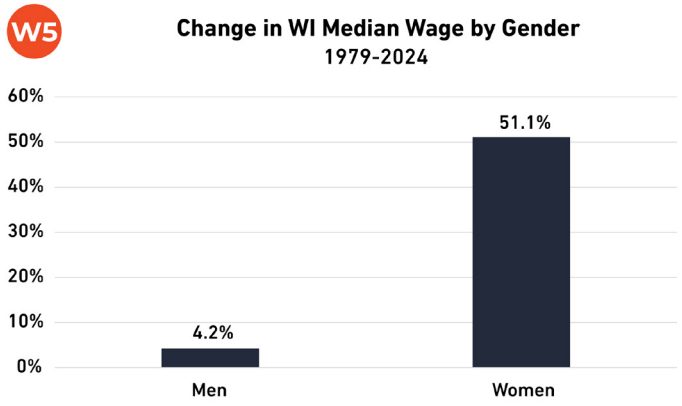
WISCONSIN'S WOMEN MAKE STRONG GAINS OVER 45 YEARS, RACIAL WAGE INEQUALITY GROWS

W5 and W6 demonstrate that since 1979, women's wages have grown rapidly while men's wages have only edged up.

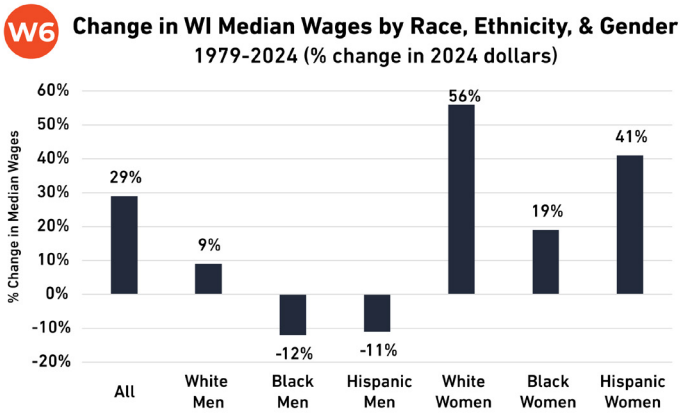
Over the last 45 years, there has been a remarkable closing in the gender wage gap. As shown in W5, from 1979-2024, women's wages grew by more than 50%. Over the same period, men's wages grew only very slightly. The gender gap in wages is closing as women make gains.

W6 makes it clear that within race and ethnicity groups, it is white women growing wages that are driving the positive picture for women. W6 shows that white women have experienced 56% wage growth. Hispanic women have had substantial gains as well, with wages up 41%. Black women's wages have grown, but much more slowly, with median wages growing by just 19%.

The race and ethnicity differences for men are stark as well. Men's wage trends over 1979-2024 are much less impressive. For white men, wages grew slightly over the period. But median wages for Black and Hispanic have actually fallen substantially. While the median for white men grew by 9% over 1979-2024, Black men's median wage declined 12% and Hispanic men's wage fell 11%.



Source: Economic Policy Institute. 2025. State of Working America Data Library, Version 2025.7.17. https://data.epi.org.

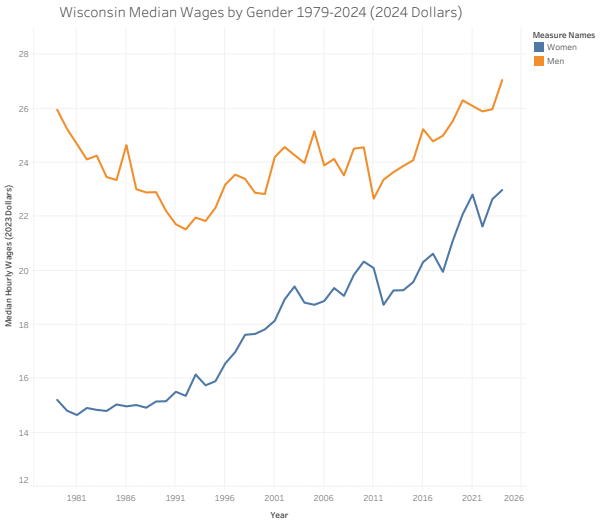


Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of 1979-2024 Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau and State of Working America Data Library, "Median real hourly wage," 2025.

GENDER, RACIAL, AND ETHNIC WAGE DISPARITY – INTERACTIVE DATA

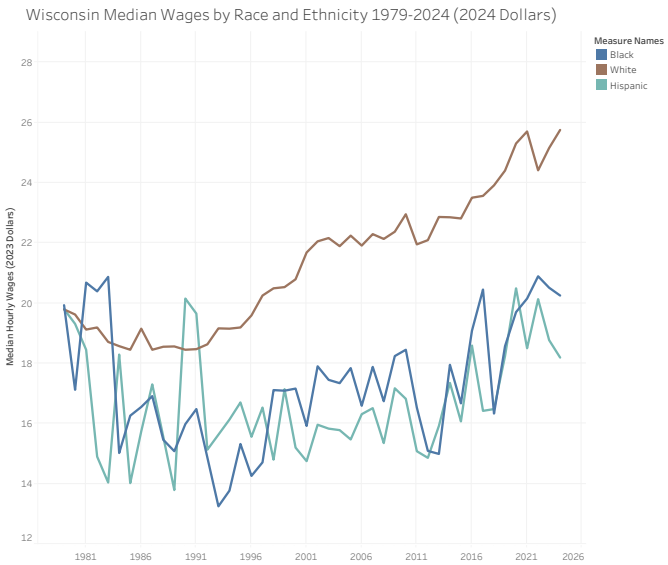
The figure below allows readers to dig into Wisconsin's median wage data for different groups. Given the strong positive wage trends for women, there is a remarkable shift in hierarchies in the Wisconsin labor market. In 1979, Wisconsin's labor market was marked by a clear gender disparity: men earned higher wages than women. This was true for race and ethnicity groups (i.e., white, Black, and Hispanic men's wages were substantially higher than white, Black, and Hispanic women's wages). By 2024, disparity by race and ethnicity is more pronounced: white men and white women had the highest median wages, followed by other race, ethnicity and gender groups.

W7 shows how the gap in median wages between men and women has shrunk from 1979 to 2024.



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of 1979-2024 Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau

W8 shows how the gap in median wages between white, Black, and Hispanic workers has grown from 1979 to 2024.



Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of 1979-2024 Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau

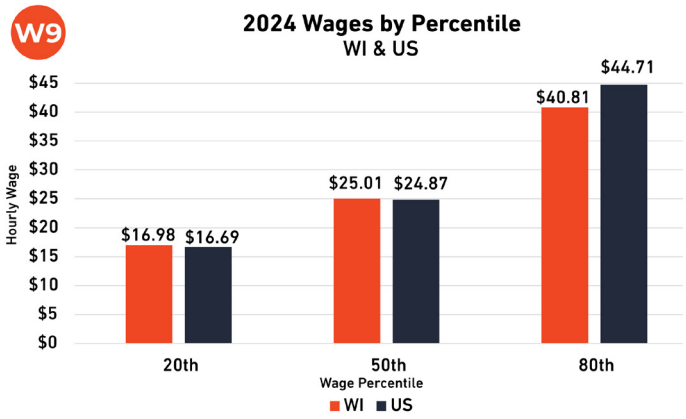
W7 and W8 provide different ways of looking at the data. The interactive presentation allows you to focus on the wages and trends of greatest interest.

INEQUALITY IN THE WAGE DISTRIBUTION

W9 provides a view of inequality displaying the disparity between lower wage and higher wage workers in Wisconsin and the U.S.

The median wage provides information from the middle of the wage distribution, but offers no insight into the distance between higher and lower wage earners. In Wisconsin, the 20th percentile worker (who earns more than 20% of the workforce, and less than 80%) earns $16.98 per hour. Near the top of the wage distribution, the 80th percentile worker earns $40.81, more than twice as much per hour as the 20th percentile worker.

Both the 20th percentile wage and the 80th percentile wages have reached their highest levels.



Source: Economic Policy Institute. 2025. State of Working America Data Library, Version 2025.7.17. https://data.epi.org.

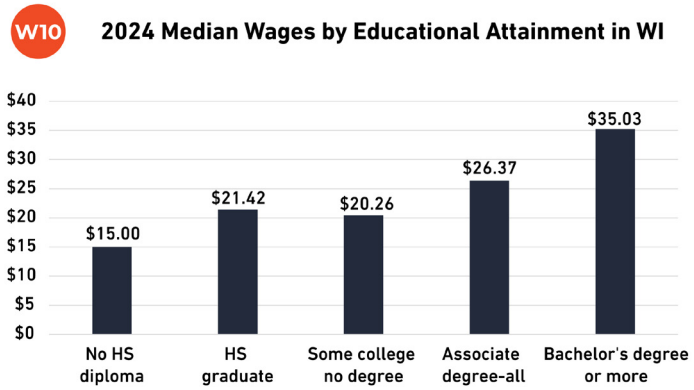
Raising the Minimum Wage in Wisconsin Would Help Close the Racial and Gender Pay Gap

Since 2009, Wisconsin's minimum wage has been stuck at the federal level: $7.25 an hour. Raising the minimum wage to $15 per hour would not only be politically popular but would directly or indirectly raise the wages of 231,800 (or 18%) of women workers, 36,200 (or 25.6%) Black workers, and 50,200 (or 26.6%) Hispanic workers in the state. Read more about the potential benefits of a higher minimum wage in our report *Can't Survive on 7.25*.

EDUCATION AND WAGES

W10 demonstrates the continued importance of college completion for workers' wages in Wisconsin.

Workers who have associate's or bachelor's degrees earned wages above the state median. Working Wisconsinites with bachelor's degrees or more education earned $35.03 per hour, while those with associate's degrees earned $26.37. Completing a two- or four-year college degree is associated with stronger wages, but just attending college without completing the degree has almost no effect. The wages of Wisconsinites with some college but no degree, $20.26, are actually just slightly lower than wages of workers who ended their education with a high school degree (median wage $21.42). Workers without a high school diploma earned a median wage of $15 per hour.



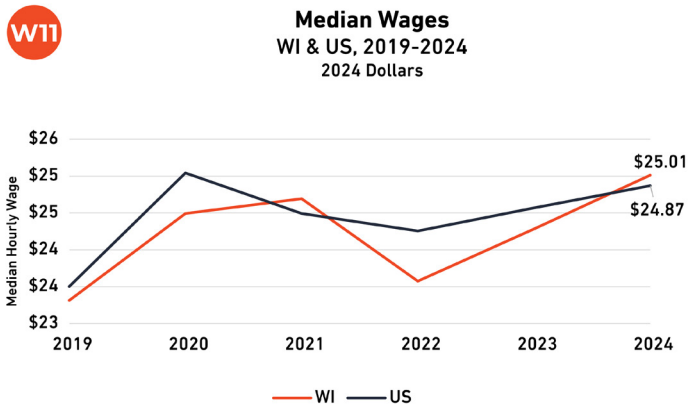
Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of 1979-2024 Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau

2019-2024 WAGES: WAGES HAVE GROWN AFTER PANDEMIC SHUTDOWNS

W11 shows the changes in median wages in the U.S. and Wisconsin from 2019 to 2024. (All values are expressed in 2024 dollars which allows us to compare the actual purchasing power of wages.)

From 2019 to 2024, median wages grew in the U.S. and Wisconsin. National median wages grew from $23.50 to $24.87 per hour. In Wisconsin wages grew slightly faster from $23.32 to $25.01.

Wage growth was interrupted in 2022, when wages fell due to inflation. But strong economic growth and tight labor markets have supported wage increases across recent years. The current wage growth trajectory began about 10 years ago, with strong growth disrupted by the pandemic and inflation. Even taking the wage setback in 2022 into account, the wage trajectory of the last 9 years is the longest and strongest period of wage growth dating back to 1979.



Source: Economic Policy Institute. 2025. State of Working America Data Library, Version 2025.7.17. https://data.epi.org.

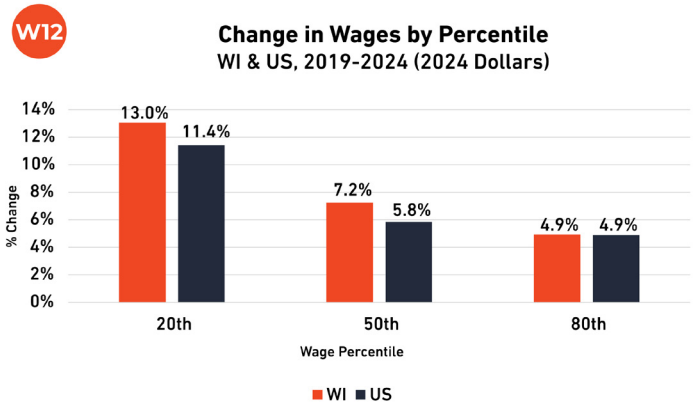
2019-2024 WAGE GROWTH NARROWS WAGE INEQUALITY

W12 shows the wage gains for workers at the 20th, 50th, and 80th percentiles in both Wisconsin and the United States from 2019-2024. (Inflation is taken into account so these are changes in the purchasing power of wages.)

In a notable departure from increasing wage inequality in previous decades, lower wage workers have secured the strongest wage gains from 2019 to 2024. This is true for lower wage workers across the nation and in Wisconsin.

From 2019 to 2024, wages of higher wage workers (workers who earn more than 80% of the workforce) rose 5%. For lower wage workers (at the 20th percentile in the wage distribution) wages grew more than twice as fast, surging 13% in Wisconsin. The wage growth for low wage workers in the state is faster than the national pace of wage gains.

Lower wage workers have seized the opportunity provided by tight labor markets and moved to higher paying jobs and secured higher wages in jobs that they stay in. As a result, our wage distribution is more equal today than it was in 2019.

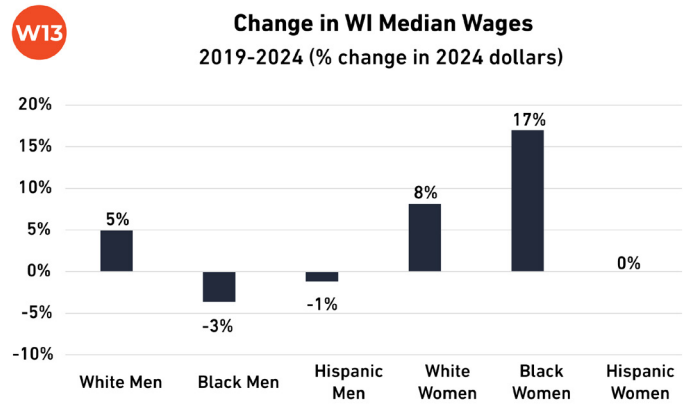


Source: Economic Policy Institute. 2025. State of Working America Data Library, Version 2025.7.17. https://data.epi.org.

2019-24 WAGE TRENDS FOR RACE AND GENDER GROUPS

W13 shows the recent change in median wages by gender, race, and ethnicity in Wisconsin.

Black women have made the strongest wage gains in the last five years, with wages up 17%. White women (wages up 8%) and white men (wages up 5%) also moved forward. Hispanic women's wages have not advanced at all and Hispanic men's wages have fallen slightly. Black men's wages show the worst trajectory over the period, with wages down 3%.



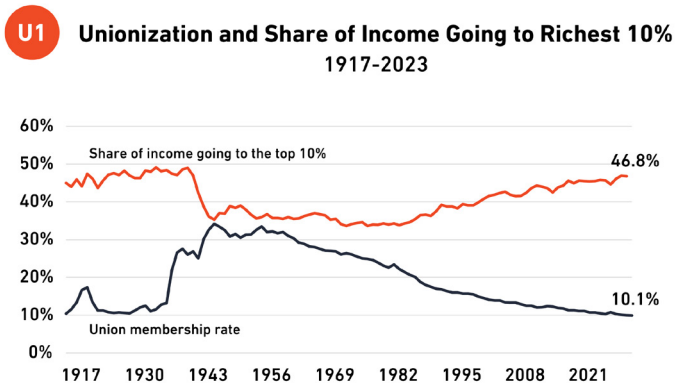
Source: Economic Policy Institute analysis of 1979-2024 Current Population Survey microdata from the U.S. Census Bureau

UNIONS

UNIONS, A FORCE FOR SHARED PROSPERITY, ARE UNDER ATTACK

Labor unions work to raise wages, secure better working conditions, and support policies to improve the lives of working people. They are important inside firms and more broadly in society as well. Inside firms, workers join together and through unions leverage collective power to secure higher pay and better working conditions. When unions represent a sufficient share of workers in an industry, they also raise job quality in that industry for all workers, even those who aren't unionized. Unions play an important role in advocating for policies that improve the lives of working people – things like increasing access to health care, raising the minimum wage, and enforcing higher safety standards. By bringing workers together, unions are an important counterweight to the organized power of business. **For working people, unions are good news, but they are facing sharp headwinds, especially as the new federal administration actively undermines and attacks them.**

U1 shows that as unions have declined, inequality has surged.



Source: Economic Policy Institute. "It's time for Colorado to remove barriers to unionization" 2025. https://www.epi.org/publication/co-union-law/

Unions represent a declining share of the workforce, and as they have fallen, inequality has surged. U1 shows the share of income going to the nation's richest 10%, which has increased dramatically since the 1980s. Income inequality in the U.S. has reached levels not seen since the 1920s. U1 also charts the share of the workforce in unions. Unionization tripled from 10 to 30% in the 1930s and 1940s and remained steady through the 1960s. A slow decline began in the 1970s and then accelerated. Since the 1980s, union membership has fallen dramatically back to the level of the mid-1930s.

Unionization has been falling, but public support for unions has risen to the highest level in 60 years. Gallup found that 70% of Americans approve of labor unions — a level of public support that hasn't been reached since 1965. Workers have increased their mobilization, and in 2023, work stoppages (which include strikes and other worker actions to stop work) reached a high not seen in more than two decades. The contract struggles of the United Auto Workers (UAW), Teamsters and Hollywood writers, and new organizing at Amazon and Starbucks have all made the news, building a new image for unions' role in our economy.

Workers have led seven strikes and thirteen protests in Wisconsin since January 1, 2024. These actions include strikes of health care, construction, food services, transportation, and manufacturing workers. The protests include a broad range of workers demanding higher wages, greater job security, and better working conditions. Additionally, more workers are increasingly petitioning to join unions. These actions build on increasing interest in the labor movement, especially among younger workers. However, renewed enthusiasm and action has not yet translated into gains in union membership.

For unions, unfortunately, the current moment is more defined by the aggressive hostility of the federal government than by the increasing interest of working people. In a move called "the largest single action of union-busting in American history," the administration revoked the union rights of 1 million federal workers. The deunionization has been especially intense at the Veterans Administration where some 377,000 workers have lost their job security and contract protections. Federal worker contracts help protect the integrity of civil service work, research and data, and whistleblowers in federal agencies. Undermining federal unions not only denigrates federal work, it also makes our country less safe and our government less transparent. As a recent Center for American Progress report concluded:

"These attacks could not come at a worse time for the American public. Unionized federal workers have negotiated important protections that preserve scientific integrity; compensate workers on recovery or investigation missions for American prisoners of war and soldiers missing in action; protect workers who report patient abuse at VA hospitals; safeguard worker safety for USDA food inspection workers; and reinforce whistleblower protections at federal agencies that protect the public, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency. At agencies where workers recently lost their bargaining rights, the administration allegedly forced federal regulators overseeing vaccine safety to resign and ordered the U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission to stop doing its job of issuing new rules that keep nuclear power plants safe."

Also ominous for unions is the administration's approach to the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) which is the federal agency that protects labor rights. In an unprecedented move, Trump fired NLRB member Gwynne Wilcox for "unduly disfavoring the interests of employers" and is nominating members who are likely to side consistently with employer interests. The NLRB plays a critical role in the rules and decisions that define the legal terrain for unions and employers. These pro-corporate steps at the NLRB undermine its independence and ability to protect labor rights.

100 Days, 100 Ways

In *100 Days, 100 Ways*, the Economic Policy Institute identified 100 different policy actions the Trump administration had pursued that harmed workers in its first hundred days in office. These policies speak volumes about the administration's disdain for unions. From the report:

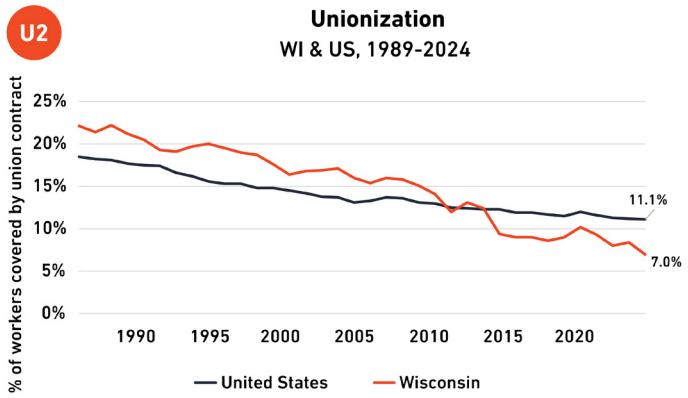
"Trump also attacked workers' union and collective bargaining rights and the independent federal agency tasked with protecting these fundamental labor rights. He fired National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) Member Gwynne Wilcox for "unduly disfavoring the interests of employers"—making very clear his expectation that the NLRB members side with employers if they don't want to lose their jobs. This is further evident by Trump nominating a partner at Morgan Lewis, the firm challenging the constitutionality of the NLRB, as the agency's General Counsel. Within the federal workforce, President Trump stripped more than one million federal workers of their rights to organize and collectively bargain. Unions and collective bargaining provide workers with critical leverage to help improve their wages, benefits, and working conditions. Research shows that high rates of unionization are consistently associated with higher wages and better working conditions for both union and nonunion workers. By weakening workers' organizing and bargaining rights, the Trump administration has hamstrung key tools for workers to improve their wages and working conditions."

Workers Building Power In Wisconsin

In Wisconsin, despite anti-union policy, workers continue to work together to form unions and improve their jobs. In Milwaukee, workers in the Deer District secured an industry leading contract for their concessions, food service, and security jobs. Their union, MASH, continues to expand its reach and impact work which we documented in *Community Benefits, to Collective Bargaining, and Back: Building Worker Power in Milwaukee*.

WISCONSIN UNIONIZATION

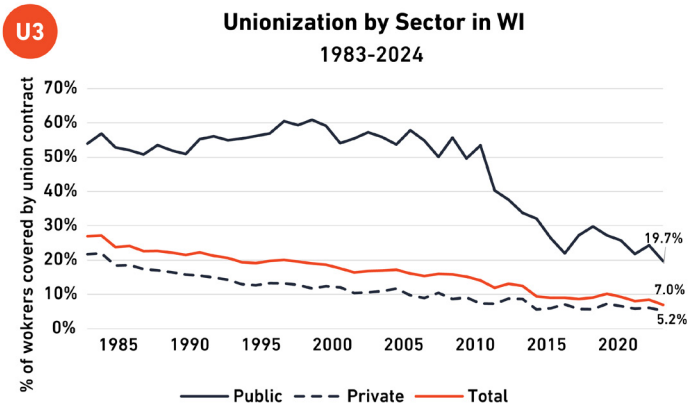
Despite proud union history, union membership in Wisconsin has fallen dramatically.



Source: Hirsch, Barry T., David A. Macpherson, and William E. Even (2025). Union Membership, Coverage, and Earnings from the CPS. https://unionstats.com

Wisconsin's history of strong unions and their dramatic decline is clear in U2. In 1989, 22% of Wisconsin workers were in unions; a rate of unionization well above the national rate. For both the state and the nation, union representation has been falling ever since. Wisconsin's decline has been more pronounced. In 2012, Wisconsin's unionization rate fell below the national average and has stayed below it ever since. In 2024, just 7% of Wisconsin workers were in unions. The national rate of unionization is just above half what it was in 1988. In Wisconsin, the decline is much steeper: Wisconsin unionization is less than one-third its 1988 level.

U3 provides unionization trends in the public and private sectors and shows that Wisconsin's deunionization occurred especially in public sector unions.



Source: Hirsch, Barry T., David A. Macpherson, and William E. Even (2025). Union Membership, Coverage, and Earnings from the CPS. https://unionstats.com

Across the early 2000s, more than half of public sector workers in the state were union members. Since 2011, public sector unionization has collapsed, with just 20% of Wisconsin public sector workers unionized in 2024. This decline is the direct result of state policy which undermined the state's public sector unions. (See next section for details on Act 10.)

While public sector deunionization has been rapid, Wisconsin's private sector workers have also experienced a decline in union membership. The faster declines in private sector union rates are the direct result of Wisconsin's 2015 passage of "right to work" legislation which makes operating unions in the private sector much harder. The chart makes clear that public sector unionization has fallen much more dramatically but as more workers are private sector workers, the ongoing slide in unionization to just 5% of the workforce is critical as well.

WISCONSIN PUBLIC SECTOR UNIONS: REDEFINED IN 2011

The collapse of Wisconsin's public sector unionization is the direct result of state policy.

In 2011, despite an outpouring of support for public sector bargaining rights, the state legislature passed Act 10 which restructured the terms of Wisconsin's public sector unionization, reducing public unions' power, relevance, and membership.

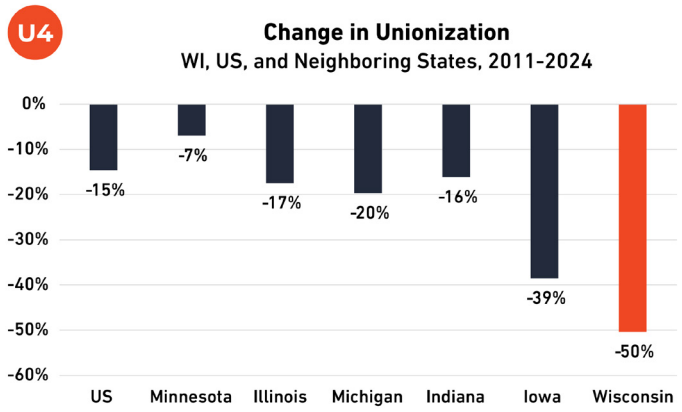
The structure of Act 10 does not actually prohibit the existence of public sector unions. Rather, it restructures the rules around them, limiting their power and relevance and making it extremely difficult to operate. For example, Act 10 limits the bargaining of public-sector unions to only wage increases that cannot exceed the rate of inflation. This obviously undermines the relevance of wage negotiations and leaves some of the most important issues to workers — benefits, safety, and scheduling – off the table. Further, employers are not allowed to collect union dues in paychecks, even when workers demonstrate and document interest in such collection.

Additionally, Act 10 requires an annual vote to maintain their certification as a union. In that vote, the union must receive support of at least 51% of all members of the unit, regardless of how many members actually vote. Taken together, Act 10 has reduced the potential positive impact of public sector unions while substantially increasing the burden of operating them. Public sector unions have been devastated as a result.

In recent years, unions in the state have brought legal challenges to Act 10. A lower court ruled against Act 10, but nothing has changed as the decision is being appealed and is yet to be decided by the Wisconsin Supreme Court. More than a decade after it was passed, the status of Act 10 remains uncertain.

UNION TRENDS IN WISCONSIN VS. NEIGHBORING STATES

U4. Wisconsin union membership plummets.



Source: Hirsch, Barry T., David A. Macpherson, and William E. Even (2025). Union Membership, Coverage, and Earnings from the CPS. https://unionstats.com

From 2011 to 2024, Wisconsin's unionization rate fell in half, from 14% to 7%. Over the same period, national unionization fell from 13% to 11%. Wisconsin's union rates are plummeting as national rates and the rates of our neighbors fall less rapidly.

State trends in unionization reflect both state policy and industrial structure. With unionization falling from 15.8% to 14.7% over 2011-24, Minnesota has experienced substantially less decline in unions than even the national pace. Unionization in Illinois and Indiana fell slightly faster than the national pace. Michigan deunionization exceeded national declines. Iowa and Wisconsin dramatically outstripped the national pace of decline.

UNIONS AND WAGES

Unions build worker power and shared prosperity.

Despite federal and state policies that have impeded unionization over the last half century, unions continue to provide workers with the means to improve wages and working conditions in their jobs. When unions win strong contracts, as the UAW did, non-union worksites raise wages in response (as Toyota's U.S. facilities did just after the UAW contract was signed). Unions are also a social force, supporting policy that helps workers, families, and communities thrive. Unions have

been essential partners in movements to raise the minimum wage, to defend the ACA, and to secure strong protections and support for all workers. Workers in Wisconsin continue to organize, to pursue their collective interests, and improve their work and communities. State and federal policy changes could help support this work, but the work will go on in any policy environment, as long as workers see reason to join together in order to improve their jobs.

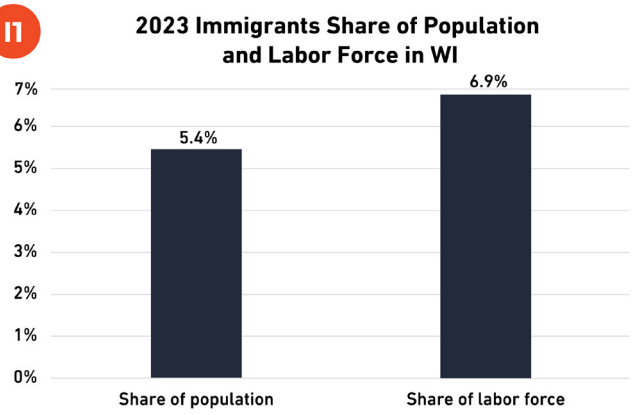
IMMIGRANTS

Some 320,000 immigrants call Wisconsin home, generating $23 billion in economic output each year. They are business owners, health care providers, educators, and skilled tradespeople, filling roles from software development to agriculture. Federal data shows that in 2023, immigrants made up 7 percent of the Wisconsin workforce, and according to Kids Forward, immigrants made up 11% of the state's Main Street business owners, 16% of physicians, 9% of construction workers, and more than 60% of manicurists and pedicurists in 2022. Immigrant workers are essential to our dairy industry and make up 12% of the state's agricultural workforce. In the tight labor markets, these workers sustain industries and services that keep Wisconsin thriving.

Despite considerable economic and cultural contributions, immigrants face persistent barriers to fully participating in the workforce and community life. The current administration's anti-immigrant policies have increased fear and dampened new immigration, constricting the Wisconsin economy where labor markets are already tight. Though it is largely a federal issue, state policy also matters. In Wisconsin, limited access to driver's licenses, tuition equity, and professional licensing, along with language barriers, restrict immigrants' economic opportunity. These challenges for immigrant families limit the state's ability to meet its workforce needs. (For more on these barriers, see Kids Forward's 2025–27 *State Budget analysis* here.)

Policies that expand opportunity for immigrants will strengthen Wisconsin's economy and communities. Restoring driver's licenses for all, ensuring tuition equity, increasing language access, and enabling DACA recipients to obtain professional licenses are concrete state policy steps that would support immigrants. These policies would also boost state revenue, increase the growth of industries and promote safer, more inclusive communities. (More detailed recommendations can be found in Kids Forward's report, *Immigrants Are a Vital Part of Wisconsin's Future,* here.)

11



Source: American Immigration Council. "Immigrants in Wisconsin." Map the Impact, American Immigration Council map.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/locations/wisconsin/.

FEDERAL POLICY

Wisconsin's economy and working families are facing dramatic changes in federal policy which define the state of working Wisconsin this year. In this section, we discuss the changes that are undermining economic growth, the anti-worker administrative moves, aspects of the new federal budget, and the deeply disturbing attacks on federal data infrastructure.

ECONOMIC STORM ON THE HORIZON

Tariffs and anti-immigrant policy, hallmarks of the new administration, undermine economic growth.

Out of the chaos of tariff announcements and reversals starting in April, a new U.S. high tariff regime is emerging bringing tariffs to levels not seen in nearly 100 years. Tariffs, taxes on imports to the U.S., will raise the price of goods, and American consumers will pay the cost. As the Economic Policy Institute explains: "American households will bear most of the burden of higher tariffs. This will mostly come through higher prices for imported goods and, crucially, higher prices for domestic goods that compete with imports." With increased costs already a concern, households will be hard pressed to cover the tariff-induced $2400 increase in prices that Yale's Budget Lab estimates the average household will face.

The new administration's aggressive anti-immigrant and deportation campaign also undermines economic strength. Economists and investors have observed that immigration changes may constrain economic growth even more than the high cost of tariffs. Employers are already complaining about the impact of the raids on their workforce and customers. In response to employer complaints, the Trump administration briefly directed ICE to end enforcement in farms, hotels, and restaurants (a directive that was quickly withdrawn).

As the chief analyst at Moody's, Mark Zandi, wrote after the weak July jobs report was released: "It's no mystery why the economy is struggling; blame increasing U.S. tariffs and highly restrictive immigration policy. The tariffs are cutting increasingly deeply into the profits of American companies and the purchasing power of American households. Fewer immigrant workers means a smaller economy."

AN ANTI-WORKER AGENDA

Further, and contrary to its populist rhetoric, the Trump administration has pursued a broad and savage anti-worker agenda. The administration has unleashed an aggressive campaign against federal workers and their unions. In an unprecedented act of union busting, the administration has ended collective bargaining rights of 1 million federal workers. Not content with ending unionization just for federal workers, the administration is also tilting the make-up of the National Labor Relations Board, which oversees and protects union rights, to increase its responsiveness to employers. The administration gutted the federal workforce charged with protecting occupational health and safety (two-thirds of workers laid off) and nearly eliminated all capacity to enforce federal anti-discrimination laws by laying off 90% of the staff that carried out that work. The administration also rescinded an existing executive order that established minimum wages for federal contractors and was estimated to have increased wages for some 400,000 workers on federal contracts.

The federal budget, enacted this summer, contains hundreds of provisions with disturbing implications for working people. It holds enormous tax breaks for the rich. By permanently extending the first-term Trump tax cuts for the very wealthy, the new budget delivers $1 trillion over the next 10 years to the nation's richest 1% and increases the national budget deficit to unprecedented levels. Analysis from the Institute Taxation and Economic Policy Wisconsin shows that the annual tax break to Wisconsin's richest 1% will be $67,000. And the tax break for the bottom fifth of households in the state? Just $70.

The federal budget will also take insurance away from some 70,000 Wisconsinites, according to estimates from KFF, with 54,000 Wisconsinites losing their medicaid coverage and 18,000 Wisconsinites losing coverage due to changes in the health care marketplaces created by the Affordable Care Act. Dramatic reductions in federal food assistance will likely strip 90,000 Wisconsinites of access to food. More than 70,000 low-income students in colleges and universities across Wisconsin will face substantial reductions in financial aid. All of this, and more, is coming and will hit lower wage working families across the state especially hard.

The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities offered this summary:

"The House and Senate Republicans have now passed a bill that will raise families' food and health care costs, increase poverty and hunger, take health coverage away from millions of people, and drive up deficits — all to give costly tax cuts to the wealthy and corporations....

Unfortunately, it is their constituents who will pay the price...."

WILL WE TRUST THE DATA NEXT YEAR?

We close with a final concern about the very data that has made this report possible for three decades.

In July, when the jobs report provided showed a weakening economy, Trump fired the respected commissioner of the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) Erika McEntarfer. He baselessly asserted that the bad news was "concocted." The economy is great, according to him, and he will find a commissioner to tell him so.

Trump's approach is a disaster for economic decision making and for public trust. Good economic decisions require reliable data. As the American Economics Association wrote: "The BLS has long had a well-deserved reputation for professional excellence and nonpartisan integrity. Safeguarding this tradition is vital for the continued health of the U.S. economy and public trust in our institutions."

The BLS monthly jobs report provides a timely snapshot of labor market dynamics which inform investing and hiring decisions as well as policy choices. BLS data also measures the rate of inflation through the consumer price index. The rising price of goods is not only a key economic indicator but also the scale by which Social Security payments are adjusted and a point of reference in private and union wage negotiations.

Federal data has also been the core source of this report for decades, allowing us to see what is going on in Wisconsin from a worker's perspective. The independence of the BLS and integrity of its resources has been long supported and assumed. We might disagree about what the data mean, but we all draw from these same trusted sources.

Replacing the BLS commissioner sends a signal that the president will only accept data that confirms his narrative. The administration's dismissal of expertise, data, and research (which includes economic statistics but reaches far beyond) undermines public trust in whatever data is released. Without reliable independent data, we cannot understand the economy nor, more narrowly, can the High Road Strategy Center continue confidently producing reports that draw on it. With hopes for continued national commitment to reliable data, and fears about the quality of what politically motivated "revisions" will do, we will anxiously monitor changes in leadership and data at the BLS.

HIGH ROAD
STRATEGY CENTER

Equity
Sustainability
Democracy

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