

THE UW WORKER BILL OF RIGHTS: STANDARDS FOR THE WORKERS WHO MAKE PUBLIC HIGHER EDUCATION WORK IN WISCONSIN

Drafted by the American Federation of Teachers-Wisconsin Higher Education Council

Preamble

The Constitution of the State of Wisconsin provides for “the establishment of a state university at or near the seat of state government, and for connecting with the same, from time to time, such colleges in different parts of the state as the interests of education may require.” And state law furthermore calls on the University of Wisconsin “to develop human resources, to discover and disseminate knowledge, to extend knowledge and its application beyond the boundaries of its campuses, and to serve and stimulate society by developing in students heightened intellectual, cultural, and humane sensitivities, scientific, professional and technological expertise, and a sense of purpose.” All who work in the University of Wisconsin System thus contribute to what has come to be known as the Wisconsin Idea—the pursuit of truth and the quest to educate our students and the communities where we live. Hence the conditions under which we work are directly related to knowledge creation, undergraduate and graduate instruction, and public outreach. We assert that for our university to be an environment where scholarship and learning can thrive, it must also be equitable. To that end, the AFT-W Higher Education Council affirms the following ten rights as fundamental:

1. The right to an affordable, high-quality, publicly funded UW System

Over the past decade, the most drastic budget cuts since the formation of the UW System, combined with a tuition freeze, have caused instability and uncertainty at campuses across the system. All university workers serve in the interests of the entire state’s citizenry. Thus, both the university workers and the public have the right to a fully funded tuition freeze and restoration of the UW System funding that has been lost. Currently, state funding on a per capita basis is below \$7,000 per full time equivalent (FTE) student, the lowest it has been since the establishment of the UW System in 1973. To restore funding even to Republican Governor Tommy Thompson’s last budget (2001), the state should budget for at least \$10,000 per student.

2. The right to meaningful shared governance

A university is a community, and all workers should have access to meaningful shared governance that goes beyond merely an “advisory” role. Our universities should model the democracy we expect our society to be. All university workers, in addition to students, have the right to meaningful academic governance that adheres to [the principles of the American Association of University Professors \(AAUP\) on academic freedom](#). Meaningful shared governance considers that “the variety and complexity of the tasks performed by institutions of higher education produce an inescapable interdependence among governing board, administration, faculty, students, and others. The relationship calls for adequate communication among these components, and full opportunity for appropriate joint planning and effort.”

Note, however, that the right to shared governance does not supplant the labor rights that all university workers enjoy (see right #10).

3. The right to academic freedom

All employees who teach or do research have the full right to academic freedom as per the guidelines of the [AAUP’s 1940 statement on academic freedom](#). No university worker should be fired or disciplined for legitimate academic activities or for extramural or intramural speech, as recognized by the [AAUP’s 1994 statement on freedom of expression and campus speech codes](#).

4. The right to stable employment and reasonable notice

While there are exceptional circumstances in which an instructor and the university might mutually benefit from a short-term relationship (e.g., teaching one class), all university workers have the right to continuous contracts following a reasonable probationary period. Temporary contracts should not be used as a permanent means to pay less, reduce benefits, halt professional growth, or diminish voice in the workplace.

No university worker should be forced into a continuing series of temporary contracts. Any appointment to a position with new duties should come with enough notification so that the worker has adequate time to prepare. Similarly, any cancellation of courses should come with enough notification so that the worker has adequate time to pursue other employment opportunities.

5. The right to due process

All those who work in the UW System have a right to “just cause” for termination or release from a contract. In order to enforce this right, all workers must have access to meaningful due process procedures, some portion of which is outside the control of campus administration. In the event of a financial emergency or verifiable educational consideration that leads to termination without “just cause,” these campus workers are entitled to severance pay commensurate with their level of professional credentials and length of service at the university.

6. The right to fair pay

All university workers deserve fair pay for their labor, and fair pay means at a minimum being able to live on one’s wages. All university employees should make at least \$15/hour with regular raises tied to cost of living increases. Moreover, since high-quality learning experiences and innovative research almost always result from collaborations that are impossible to measure, campuses should prioritize internal equity over so-called “market value” in setting wages, salaries, and benefits for their workers.

7. The right to affordable healthcare

We cannot expect dedicated commitment to the university mission, including excellence in knowledge creation and instruction, if workers are not physically and mentally well. Universities must provide free or affordable high-quality healthcare for all university workers.

8. The right to affordable childcare and paid family leave

We expect our university workers to commit to the campus and the community in which the campus is located. To facilitate this commitment, all UW campuses should make high-quality, affordable childcare available to all. All university workers are also entitled to twelve weeks of paid, job-protected family leave to bond with a new child, care for a loved one with a serious health condition, or help relieve family pressures when someone is called to active military service.

9. The right to an inclusive workplace, equity, and affirmative opportunities

Although [Civil Rights law protects all university workers against discrimination](#) on the basis of “race, color, religion, sex (including pregnancy, gender identity, and sexual orientation), national origin, age (40 or older), disability or genetic information,” our public universities in Wisconsin have a particular obligation to ensure that historically marginalized groups have equitable conditions and opportunities on campus. University workers have the right to a workplace that takes affirmative steps to ensure equality regardless of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, citizenship status, and other marginalized identities.

10. The right to organize in a labor union and collectively bargain

The first amendment of the U.S. Constitution and state law already protect university workers’ freedom to form labor unions, but this should be extended to include all of the same rights that private sector workers enjoy under the National Labor Relations Act. Ultimately, legislators need to amend state law accordingly, but in the interim individual chancellors should partially extend these rights by agreeing to meet-and-confer relationships with different worker constituencies on campus.

Endorsed by the following locals of AFT-Wisconsin, shared governance groups, and other on-campus, labor, and civic organizations: