**Headline:** How Union Workers Are Breaking New Barriers

By Tom Conway

**Author Bio:** Tom Conway is the international president of the [United Steelworkers Union (USW)](https://www.usw.org/).

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**[Article Body:]**

Dominick Sapien’s patient threw up during cardiac arrest, and he instinctively grabbed a suction tool to clear the man’s airway.

The device failed to turn on, so Sapien picked up another. When it also failed, he reached for a third. When that one broke apart, a quick-thinking Sapien flipped the patient on his side and, with a fellow paramedic performing CPR, manually scooped the vomit out of the man’s mouth to keep him from choking.

The need for functioning equipment and safer working conditions prompted Sapien and his colleagues at Frontier Ambulance to join the United Steelworkers (USW) in February 2023, making them the [first workers in decades to form a union](https://aflcio.org/2023/3/28/making-history-worker-wins) in Wyoming.

They aren’t the only ones breaking barriers. Determined to secure good wages and a seat at the table, a growing number of workers are banding together and fighting back in industries and states that long attempted to silence them.

About 1,000 firefighters, paramedics, fire marshals, emergency dispatchers, and mechanics in Fairfax County, Virginia, [overwhelmingly voted](https://www.ffxnow.com/2022/11/21/fairfax-county-firefighters-vote-to-unionize-for-historic-contract-talks/) to unionize in November 2022, advancing working people’s fight in a state that’s tried to [divide workers](https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/virginia-politics/fairfax-county-approves-collective-bargaining-ordinance/2021/10/20/c3e401dc-310a-11ec-9241-aad8e48f01ff_story.html) and deter union membership for decades. Now, the county must bargain with public workers for the first time in about 40 years.

Workers at TCGplayer, an online trading card marketplace, in March 2023 [formed the first union at an eBay-owned company](https://www.syracuse.com/business/2023/03/tcgplayer-workers-in-syracuse-form-first-ebay-union.html) in the United States, helping to pave the way for others in the notoriously anti-labor tech industry.

And [undergraduate student workers at the University of Oregon](https://www.klcc.org/economy-business/2023-04-15/university-of-oregon-undergraduate-workers-apply-to-form-union) filed for a union election in April 2023 to [combat low pay and other exploitation](https://www.thenation.com/article/activism/university-oregon-undergraduate-labor-union/). They’re part of a wave of unionizing campaigns involving [faculty](https://usw.org/news/media-center/releases/2021/pitt-faculty-members-vote-to-join-steelworkers-union) and staff as well as undergraduate and graduate student workers at universities across the country.

“It’s a chance to change things for the better, and I think everybody really believed in that dream,” Sapien said of his own successful union drive in Wyoming, a [so-called right-to-work state](https://www.epi.org/publication/right-to-work-states-have-lower-wages/) with [relatively few union members](https://www.epi.org/publication/unions-and-well-being/) right now.

States with right-to-work laws permit workers to receive all of the benefits of union representation without paying even a small fee for services. These laws, pushed by corporations and right-wing politicians, undermine worker solidarity and starve unions of the resources they need to bargain good contracts, pursue grievances, and otherwise fight for members.

But Sapien knows that he and his co-workers will forge a robust union and stand strong together, just as they have each other’s backs in areas so remote that they sometimes lose cell phone service or have to travel to patients via snowmobile.

The three dozen paramedics and emergency medical technicians work 48-hour shifts, staff three ambulance stations, and cover [about 9,200 square miles](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/fremontcountywyoming/LND110220), a territory [more than seven times](https://www.ri.gov/facts/trivia.php#:~:text=It%20covers%20an%20area%20of,East%20to%20West%2037%20miles.) the size of Rhode Island.

“We didn’t unionize to spite the company or make a point. It’s because we genuinely care about each other and the patients,” explained Sapien, who formerly worked at a union-represented ambulance service in California and moved to Wyoming with his wife, Jessica, also a paramedic, because they relish the challenges of rural emergency medical services.

“I would hate to think I’d lose a patient because we didn’t have the tools that we needed,” he said, adding, “Nobody is going to know better than the people on the ground what the people on the ground need.”

Besides malfunctioning suction devices, he said, paramedics ran out of batteries for electronic stretchers and want input into medication ordering to ensure they have adequate supplies on hand before winter sets in each year.

They also plan to fight for safer working conditions, including a commonsense policy restricting non-emergency transports during blizzards, and improved vehicle maintenance, a concern since two wheels fell off an ambulance as two paramedics were out on the road.

“We can stop this,” Sapien recalled telling colleagues during the organizing drive.

The same desire for a voice on the job also motivates more and more museum workers to take a stand against a cultural-arts industry infamous for exploiting docents, curators, interpreters, and others on the front lines.

In March 2023, about 65 workers at Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site in Philadelphia joined the USW. Workers at the [Please Touch Museum](https://whyy.org/articles/please-touch-museum-workers-form-union/) in Philadelphia, the [Field Museum](https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/ct-biz-field-museum-union-election-20230309-jbwymentqvbmhb576aakttjfnu-story.html) in Chicago, and the [Wexner Center for the Arts](https://www.dispatch.com/story/entertainment/arts/2023/03/22/wexner-center-for-the-arts-employees-win-union-election-unanimously/70038263007/) also formed unions that same month.

Workers at Eastern State, a former prison that once housed Willie Sutton and Al Capone, cited concerns about low pay and unfair scheduling as well as the need for advancement opportunities and the [freedom to raise issues](https://www.phillyvoice.com/eastern-state-penitentiary-workers-unionize-united-steelworkers-working-conditions-pay-safety-discrimination/) without the risk of retaliation.

Just as Sapien and his colleagues see unionization as a way to provide ever-better patient care, workers at Eastern State say their input on issues like workplace safety will [help to bolster](https://usw.org/news/media-center/releases/2022/philadelphia-museum-workers-seek-election-to-join-usw) the museum’s impact and reputation. The aging open-air complex requires constant maintenance, for example, and subjects both workers and visitors to dangerous temperatures at certain times of year.

“I love Eastern State, and I love the people I work with,” explained Annie Finnegan, a member of the visitor services staff. “It’s time to make our voices heard about safety conditions, especially during extreme weather.”

With [public support for unions at record levels](https://news.gallup.com/poll/398303/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx), activists expect still more workers to follow their example and unionize to build brighter futures.

Sapien recalled how unionization immediately changed the atmosphere at Frontier Ambulance and prompted management to begin treating workers with the respect they deserve for putting their lives on the line each day.

“My co-workers are great people,” he said. “They do this for the community.”