**Headline:** How Americans Created a Wave of Pro-Worker Laws

By Tom Conway

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**[Article Body:]**

Dave Smith launched a union drive many years ago that generated enthusiastic support among his coworkers, but the effort died after management hired union-busting consultants and went on the attack.

Bosses at the Minnesota electric cooperative forced his colleagues into “captive audience” meetings, where they lied about unions, threatened the workers and sowed so much fear that the group ultimately voted down a chance at a better life.

Now, thanks to legislation that Smith supported, Minnesota employers won’t be able to subject workers to that kind of bullying any longer.

Democratic Governor Tim Walz [just signed a bill](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2023/jun/07/minnesota-pro-worker-paid-leave-union) that not only [bans the mandatory anti-union meetings](https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=SF3035&version=4&session=ls93&session_year=2023&session_number=0&format=pdf) employers regularly hold to try to suppress organizing drives but also enables workers to sue bosses who try to get away with holding the meetings anyway.

Even better, that measure is one of a growing number of pro-worker laws enacted around the country in early 2023 as workers, fed up with corporate greed and exploitative bosses, fight back against a system rigged against them.

Minnesota lawmakers also [passed legislation](https://mn.gov/governor/newsroom/press-releases/#/detail/appId/1/id/579303) in May that establishes paid family and medical leave for workers, [expands workers’ compensation coverage](https://www.revisor.mn.gov/bills/text.php?number=HF2988&type=bill&version=1&session=ls93&session_year=2023&session_number=0) and requires employers in numerous industries, including warehouses and health care facilities, to [ramp up](https://minnesotareformer.com/2023/05/17/labor-victory-minnesota-lawmakers-approve-9-major-worker-friendly-changes/) safety.

In addition, legislators pushed through a bill, which Walz promptly signed, creating a [“Nursing Home Workforce Standards Board,”](https://minnesotareformer.com/2023/06/15/minnesota-is-transforming-its-nursing-home-industry-with-a-model-that-empowers-workers/) aimed at giving front-line caregivers a meaningful voice in resolving staffing shortages and other challenges facing long-term care facilities.

“It’s been such a long fight to get some of this,” noted Smith, now a member of United Steelworkers (USW) Local 2660 at U.S. Steel’s Keetac Mine who helped push for the legislation. “It’s great that we were able to stick it out and get it passed. Hopefully, we can accomplish even more next year.”

In the wake of the new forward-thinking laws, state Department of Labor and Industry Commissioner Nicole Blissenbach called Minnesota “the [best state](https://www.dli.mn.gov/news/new-workplace-protections-programs-make-minnesota-best-state-workers) for workers and their families.”

This kind of progress [doesn’t happen](https://ballotpedia.org/Party_control_of_Minnesota_state_government) by chance.

Union members turned out in force last November to reelect Walz, keep the pro-worker majority in the House and [flip the Senate](https://www.axios.com/2022/12/29/democrats-state-legislature-election-midterms), previously controlled by Republicans.

Then workers followed up their victories at the ballot box by successfully advocating for legislation aimed at leveling the playing field in the workplace.

Smith, for example, provided lawmakers with testimony explaining how the electric cooperative usurped his labor rights years ago and how that kind of harassment leaves workers “organizing in secrecy for fear of losing their jobs.”

“It always left a sour taste in my mouth,” said Smith, who stayed at the utility a couple of years longer before landing a position at Keetac in Keewatin, Minnesota.

That USW-represented job “changed my life,” he added. “We had trouble making ends meet before. Now, I’ve sent three kids to college.”

As Minnesotans charted their path forward, union members in Michigan made similar strides by helping to reelect Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer and [installing Democratic majorities](https://www.freep.com/story/news/politics/elections/2022/11/09/michigan-house-senate-democrats-election-results/69632658007/) in both the House and Senate for the first time in decades.

At the urging of those same workers, lawmakers quickly passed, and Whitmer signed, legislation repealing falsely named “right-to-work” (RTW) laws that Republicans rammed through a decade earlier to [silence workers’ voices](https://www.michigan.gov/whitmer/news/press-releases/whitmer-signs-restoring-workers-rights-bill-package-into-law) and bankrupt unions.

“Right-to-work is union busting,” noted Jay McMurran, a member of the Steelworkers Organization of Active Retirees (SOAR) from Michigan, noting these laws undermine worker solidarity and power by allowing nonmembers to receive union services for free.

Union members in Vermont helped to [increase the number of pro-worker lawmakers](https://ballotpedia.org/Vermont_House_of_Representatives_elections%2C_2022) in both chambers of the state legislature last fall. Now, they’re awaiting the House’s vote on a bill, [already passed by the Senate](https://vermontbiz.com/news/2023/may/12/proposed-labor-law-would-make-vermont-one-few-states-ban-captive-audience-meetings), to ban [captive audience](https://legislature.vermont.gov/Documents/2024/Docs/BILLS/S-0102/S-0102%20As%20passed%20by%20the%20Senate%20Official.pdf) meetings there as well.

And New York’s Democratic-controlled legislature [just passed its own bill](https://news.bloomberglaw.com/daily-labor-report/new-york-ban-on-captive-audience-meetings-sent-to-gov-hochul), now on Governor Kathy Hochul’s desk, protecting workers from anti-union meetings in that state.

“I do think there’s a shift,” Richard Knowles, a former USW local president at Allied Chemical in New York, said of the wave of pro-worker laws.

Workers put at risk during the pandemic and forced to endure “nonstop” production environments, among many other abuses, are not only demanding change but electing officials willing to join the fight, Knowles explained. That includes many younger workers who are contributing to the [soaring level of support](https://news.gallup.com/poll/398303/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx) for unions.

“They need to get more money,” Knowles, who helped to lead 24 union drives during his career, said of young workers. “They need to get better benefits. They need to get out of their parents’ house. They need to get a union.”

While workers accumulate wins in the states, the USW and other unions also continue fighting for national legislation that will extend the same protections to all Americans wherever they live.

Democrats in the U.S. House twice passed the [Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act](https://www.npr.org/2021/03/09/975259434/house-democrats-pass-bill-that-would-protect-worker-organizing-efforts), which would ban captive audience meetings, allow workers and employers to override states’ RTW laws and impose steep financial penalties on employers who violate workers’ labor rights.

The legislation would make it easier for workers to organize at a time that more and more Americans are seeking to join unions. Petitions for union elections [surged](https://www.nlrb.gov/news-outreach/news-story/unfair-labor-practices-charge-filings-up-16-union-petitions-remain-up-in#:~:text=Who%20We%20Are-,Unfair%20Labor%20Practices%20Charge%20Filings%20Up%2016%25%2C%20Union%20Petitions%20Remain,Up%20in%20Fiscal%20Year%202023&text=During%20the%20first%20six%20months,%25%E2%80%94from%208%2C275%20to%209%2C592.) 53 percent during the 2022 fiscal year and continue to increase this year, according to the National Labor Relations Board.

The PRO Act previously died because of a lack of Republican support in the Senate. But pro-worker members of Congress reintroduced it again this year, and hundreds of USW activists, including McMurran, pounded the halls of the Capitol to build support for the legislation during the union’s Rapid Response, Legislative and Policy Conference in Washington, D.C., in mid-June.

“We don’t give up,” McMurran said.