

Chair Taylor, Vice Chair Bonham and members of the committee,

My name is Zack Culver, and I am the Business Manager/Secretary Treasurer for LIUNA Local 737. I am providing written testimony today on behalf of the almost 3,000 Members we represent.

We strongly encourage your support of SB 916, which would repeal the current law that precludes striking workers from being eligible for unemployment insurance. This bill would help ensure that workers are able to stay afloat while fighting for a fair contract.

Strikes are never taken lightly by workers. Prior to making the decision to strike, members take a “strike vote” to ensure that all workers are in support due to the immense sacrifices involved. This is often a deeply stressful time for both workers and their families. LIUNA Local 737 members went on strike in early 2023 at the CertainTeed roofing plant in the Portland area, due to the employer’s unwillingness to provide a decent cost of living increase during a period of unprecedented inflation. The members stood strong and resolute but each day they were not being paid, the employer knew they would need to go back to work soon in fear of losing benefits for their families or the ability to put food on their tables. If you ask workers about going on strike, many will say that their hands were forced by employers. Employers who refused to negotiate, rolled back benefits, froze wages, or did not address safety concerns appropriately.

Workers that go out on strike being eligible to receive unemployment insurance benefits also importantly aligns with a fundamental intended purpose of UI: Workers use the right to strike to challenge unsafe, exploitative, or otherwise unsuitable workplace conditions, low wages, and other harmful employment practices—the same types of substandard work the system was designed to safeguard against.

This is one way to help bring important balance to the bargaining table by reinforcing a good faith negotiating environment that encourages timely responses and ongoing communication to aid reaching a fair resolution. We know that there is a power imbalance in this country between employers and workers - a gap that has only grown wider in recent years. Many companies are making record profits while wages stay stagnant, leaving a workforce that increasingly struggles to keep up with inflation. While employers continue to be paid throughout bargaining and can often “starve out” employees, workers are forced to make increasingly difficult choices. If employers can remove healthcare access from striking workers, workers should be able to receive unemployment benefits to help with COBRA costs and more.

UI was intended to serve exactly these types of situations. The unemployment insurance system was established in 1935 to protect workers and families against an unexpected loss of

income due to unemployment and to support the overall economy during economic downturns. The system was also intended to prevent jobless workers from having to accept employment that is unsafe, unsuitable, or a poor match for their skills and abilities, which would drive down wages and depress labor standards for workers across the board.

Like other workers served by the UI system, striking workers are not receiving paychecks and are disconnected from their employers, at least temporarily. Striking workers may expect to return to work for the same employer, as do many other categories of workers who are currently eligible for UI benefits in most states, such as seasonal workers, workers on temporary layoff, and workers in Short Time Compensation programs.

This policy ultimately represents an important opportunity and a value decision – nurses, public servants, grocery store workers, construction workers and so many others that make our economy run – deserve to have access to these social safety net benefits in place. Both to keep help continue to make ends meet for their families and to support the local economy in the rare and drastic instance of a strike.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide these comments, I encourage the committee to please support SB 916.

Sincerely,

Zack Culver  
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