



Kimberly R Edwards
Steward, CWA Local 1298
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HB 5164
AN ACT CONCERNING UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE BENEFITS

Good afternoon, Senator Kushner, Representative Sanchez, Senator Sampson, Representative Weir, and the distinguished members of the Labor & Public Employees Committee. My name is Kimberly Edwards, I live in New Haven, and am a member and steward for Local 1298 of the Communications Workers of America. Local 1298 represents more than 2000 telecommunications workers who deliver high-quality services including broadband and wireless to Connecticut families across the State. Thank you for the opportunity to testify in support of an act concerning unemployment insurance benefits.

Connecticut law currently favors employers in labor disputes, as workers who go on strike are often denied access to unemployment benefits, presumed to have left their jobs voluntarily. However, if workers are locked out by the employer, they can access these benefits. H.B. No. 5164 aims to rectify this by enabling striking workers to receive unemployment benefits after two weeks.

It incentivizes an employer to remain at the table and negotiate in good faith to avert a strike. If they don't, they risk increasing their unemployment insurance experience ratings if the strike lasts longer than two weeks. These benefits are designed to support workers and their families during challenging periods.

Typically, they offer 50% wage replacement for up to 26 weeks; this *isn't* a bonus for workers - *who wants to make half of what they would in normal times?* - and I just want to make clear that these funds would serve as a vital economic support system rather than an enticing incentive for striking or prolonging strikes.

I started working for SNET in 1996, my very first union job, and very quickly became acquainted with both the struggle and power that comes with deciding to strike. When I voted to strike in 1998 I did not take the decision to strike lightly - Who can afford to not get paid, ??, *especially* with the cost of living in Connecticut. However, that year

6300 members went out on strike across Connecticut due to disparity and inequity in pay and benefits, as well as other factors like unlimited mandatory overtime stipulations. It was 26 days total, almost 4 weeks, where members, many with dependents (I myself was a single parent at the time), went without our normal wages. I, as well as my fellow union brothers, sisters and kin did not work in our offices or outside locations for the entirety of the strike, instead opting to be on a picket line in solidarity with and for our fellow workers. Although during the strike we received food baskets and help from other community members and organizations such as the New Haven Firebirds and others to feed our families, in some cases members were reliant on the goodwill of strangers to get by - this cannot be allowed to be a norm.

When workers engage in strikes, they advocate for protections that positively impact all workers. This was evident during the United Auto Workers (UAW) strike against Ford, GM, and Stallantis last year.

Making striking workers eligible for UI is, therefore, both good economics and consistent with the program's mandate. It would mitigate some of the immediate economic risk to workers and their families, keep dollars flowing to communities where a strike is taking place, and ensure striking workers can negotiate a fair contract with their employer.

Our neighbors in New York and New Jersey already permit striking workers to access unemployment benefits. It's time for Connecticut to follow their example. Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I am happy to answer any questions you may have.