



Leadership and Accountability in the Utah Legislature Series

Patrick Belmont

Part 5 of 6. Work should support a life, not consume one

Most Utahns are willing to work hard. What they reasonably expect in return is the chance to build a decent life.

I believe a good job should provide fair pay, reasonable security, and a meaningful voice in the conditions under which we work. It should leave enough time and energy to raise a family, care for people we love and live a life beyond the job.

Work should support a life. It should not consume one.

That principle is why I was deeply concerned by Jason Thompson's vote on HB 267, which effectively banned public employees from negotiating their compensation and working conditions. This vote would have most directly impacted teachers, firefighters, and police officers. But it should concern anyone who believes working people deserve dignity and a fair chance.

Allowing workers to negotiate their pay and working conditions does not guarantee workers everything they request. It creates a process in which both sides listen, negotiate and reach an agreement. A single teacher cannot negotiate class sizes. One firefighter cannot secure adequate staffing or safety equipment. One public employee may be unable to challenge an unsafe workload without risking retaliation. Acting together gives frontline workers a meaningful seat at the table.

Eighteen of Thompson's Republican colleagues joined every House Democrat in voting against HB 267. Thompson voted for it. And it only passed by a narrow margin. His vote mattered. Teachers, police officers, firefighters and others should expect an explanation from Thompson.

Fortunately, working Utahns did not just accept the passing of HB 267 as their sealed fate. True to the best of who we are, Utahns responded in an extraordinary way. Teachers, firefighters, other workers and ordinary residents organized across the state. In 30 days, they submitted more than 320,000 signatures, far more than enough to put the repeal of HB 267 on the ballot this November. It was inspiring, community-driven work. It was probably the most successful signature-gathering effort in Utah history.



Faced with that overwhelming response, and to avoid likely defeat of their anti-labor law in the upcoming election, the Legislature repealed its own law last December. Utahns organized and forced lawmakers to listen.

But don't be fooled. The effort to weaken workers' rights has been prominent in recent decades in Utah. Those who want to continue to marginalize workers aren't going away. We should expect further attempts to undermine workers if we keep electing the same people in upcoming legislative sessions.

I would have led a very different discussion in the Legislature. I would have started with the harder questions: What kind of economy are we trying to build? How much power should an employer have over the people whose labor makes a business function? What happens to public services when teachers, police officers, firefighters and other workers are ignored, overworked or unsafe?

And I would say plainly what too many lawmakers avoid: our economy has become more productive and wealthy, while many workers remain one illness, rent increase or missed paycheck away from crisis. Housing affordability data indicated that 45% of Cache County renters were cost-burdened by the price of housing in 2019-2023. That number is most certainly higher today.

The American economy is not suffering from a lack of effort from workers. Americans are getting crunched because power and opportunity are so unfairly distributed. I believe it is the height of hypocrisy for people like Thompson, who have been outwardly successful in their financial and business endeavors, to deprive people working to just make ends meet the ability to stand up for themselves.

A healthy economy in Utah starts with protecting all workers. And protecting workers begins with a few basic principles. People should be able to organize, negotiate reasonable pay and working conditions, and report unsafe practices without retaliation. They should get paid a living wage for an honest day's work. No one should have to choose between keeping a job and caring for a sick child, recovering from childbirth or helping an aging parent. These protections establish a floor of fairness for everyone who works. Employers who treat people well should not be undercut by competitors who evade wages, benefits or safety responsibilities.

Communities benefit when workers have stable incomes, time for family, and the confidence to speak up when something is wrong. That's how people build stable families, healthy communities and meaningful lives. In my opinion, that is what an



economy is for. And as your representative in the Utah Legislature, that's what I'll work towards.