

# SENATE BILL REPORT

## SB 5041

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As of January 21, 2025

**Title:** An act relating to unemployment insurance benefits for striking or lockout workers.

**Brief Description:** Concerning unemployment insurance benefits for striking or lockout workers.

**Sponsors:** Senators Riccelli, Conway, Hasegawa, Saldaña, Salomon, Stanford, Dhingra, Nobles, Trudeau, Valdez, Bateman, Lovelett, Cleveland, Frame, Orwall, Pedersen, Slatter, Wellman and Wilson, C..

**Brief History:**

**Committee Activity:** Labor & Commerce: 1/21/25.

**Brief Summary of Bill**

- Allows individuals unemployed due to a labor strike to receive unemployment insurance (UI) benefits following a specified disqualification period and the waiting week, provided that the labor strike is not found to be prohibited by federal or state law in a final judgment.
- Removes the provision disqualifying an individual for UI benefits based on an employer-initiated lockout resulting from a strike against another employer in a multi-employer bargaining unit.

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### SENATE COMMITTEE ON LABOR & COMMERCE

**Staff:** Susan Jones (786-7404)

**Background:** Unemployment Insurance Benefits. The Employment Security Department (ESD) administers Washington State's unemployment insurance program. An unemployed individual is eligible to receive unemployment insurance benefits (UI benefits) if the

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individual:

- worked at least 680 hours in the base year;
- was separated from employment through no fault of the claimant's or quit work for a specified good cause; and
- is able and available to work and is actively searching for suitable work.

A claimant must be unemployed for a one-week waiting period before being eligible for UI benefits.

Certain benefit payments are not charged to the experience rating accounts of employers paying contributions to the UI program.

Disqualification from Unemployment Insurance Benefits During Strike or Lockout. An individual is disqualified from UI benefits when the individual's unemployment is:

- due to a strike at the factory, establishment, or other premises where the individual is or was last employed; or
- due to a lockout by the employer who is a member of a multi-employer bargaining unit and who has locked out the employees at the factory, establishment, or other premises where the individual is or was last employed after one member of the multi-employer bargaining unit has been struck by its employees as a result of the multi-employer bargaining process.

The disqualification does not apply if:

- the individual is not participating in, financing, or directly interested in the strike or lockout that caused the unemployment; and
- the individual does not belong to a grade or class of workers participating in, financing, or directly interested in the strike or lockout.

The disqualification ends when the strike or lockout is terminated.

**Summary of Bill:** The bill as referred to committee not considered.

**Summary of Bill (Proposed Substitute):** The disqualification for striking workers is modified as follows:

- the disqualification for striking workers ends on the earlier of: (1) the second Sunday following the first date of the strike, provided that the strike is not found to be prohibited by federal or state law in a final judgment; or (2) the date the strike ends;
- if a final judgment finds that a strike is prohibited by state or federal law, any benefits paid must be repaid by the workers;
- if retroactive wages are paid for any weeks the individual received benefits, ESD must issue an overpayment assessment to recover the benefits;
- the regular one-week waiting period applies after the disqualification ends; and
- for contribution-paying employers, benefits paid to striking workers are charged only to the experience rating of the separating employer.

The disqualification based on a lockout of employees in a multi-employer bargaining unit is removed, thereby allowing those individuals to qualify for UI benefits.

**Appropriation:** None.

**Fiscal Note:** Requested on January 9, 2025.

**Creates Committee/Commission/Task Force that includes Legislative members:** No.

**Effective Date:** The bill takes effect on January 1, 2026.

**Staff Summary of Public Testimony On Proposed Substitute:** PRO: This bill will allow access to a social safety net for workers and their families by making sure employees on strike after two weeks can access unemployment insurance so they can afford basic needs like food and housing. No one goes on strike to get unemployment insurance benefits, which only provide a partial wage replacement. In the last decade, only seven strikes would have qualified under this bill, major strikes.

It's a benefit to all when people join together and speak with a more collective voice to have a say about their compensation and the work environment. This bill brings fairness and justice to the workplace. Without a social safety net during a strike, workers are faced with tremendous pressures to end the strike quickly or never go on strike in the first place. This levels the playing field. This bill will help lower wage workers secure the recognition when other options fail them because they will not have a risk to their economic ruin, if this last resort becomes necessary.

America has an inequity problem. Employers who refuse to bargain in good faith should not be allowed to use economic pressure to punish workers for exercising their rights. Structures in place to recognize unions have suffered for decades with underfunding from Congress. This bill gives lower wage workers the support when as a last resort, they strike. Strikes are not taken lightly. It is a difficult decision made during an intense period of dispute.

There's a power imbalance between the human beings who do the work and the corporations who take advantage of the conditions they've forced them into. Experiences were shared of difficult working conditions and workers' financial difficulties during strikes. Strike funds are not enough. Strikes involve uncertainty, sacrifice and risk, including loss of health care. Striking workers are temporarily disconnected from their employers and their paychecks. That's exactly the type of worker UI was designed to support. In New York and New Jersey, which already offer UI benefits to striking workers, there is no evidence that access to UI benefits makes workers more likely to go on strike. If employers know that workers have this support, they may be more likely to bargain fairly so that a strike is less likely to occur.

Some employers asked to delay the bill to get more time to understand the obligations and for ESD to implement the bill. That is why the effective date is delayed to January 1, 2026.

CON: When it comes to labor disputes, a fair question to ask is who pays? From a small business perspective, we believe the labor organizations and their workers have the responsibility and obligation to plan ahead for a labor stoppage by having a robust strike fund available to support the workers choosing to walk off the job. Small employers are already paying a higher social tax rate as a result of a UI agreement that was made during the pandemic. With social taxes already inflated and that even if these additional benefits are to be experienced, those larger employers suffering strikes would either be at or quickly reach rate class 40, meaning their premiums and contributions would be capped. That creates a shift to all other employers, meaning the tax rate would go up for small businesses far removed and not at all involved in the labor dispute in question. Small businesses simply cannot afford to subsidize large employers and their unionized workforces who get into labor disputes.

Washington already pays some of the highest unemployment costs in the country. This tax is a 100 percent employer paid and goes up administratively every year with the increase in the state average wage. The UI system is entirely employer funded with no contributions from workers. When an employer's experience rate exceeds the highest allowable rate, those additional costs are all socialized across all employers. This bill disrupts that balance, tipping the scale in favor of one side over the other. Such a shift could have severe consequences for critical sectors, including schools, infrastructure, medical institutions and other key economic drivers. UI wasn't meant to pay workers in labor disputes. We don't know how many strikes this change will inspire. Driving businesses out of Washington with bad policy leaves workers with fewer options.

Strikes also have a negative impact on our economy, on storefronts. They affect local and regional and state economies, local shops and retail stores that rely on the business from the employers and employees that are affected by these strikes, and they suffer greatly when strikes are prolonged. We are concerned that this bill will disincentivize timely resolution to strikes further hurting our economies at the local and state level.

We are opposed to this bill because of its potential impact on delaying and increasing costs of infrastructure projects. We are afraid that expanding UI benefits to compensate workers who voluntarily go on strike incentivizes prolonged labor disputes that could ultimately lead to higher costs. Examples of past strikes were given, which increased housing development and transportation project costs.

OTHER: For federal conformity, it would likely be a conformity issue with the USDOL guidance to differentiate between public and private sector. USDOL requires that for eligibility for UI benefits that relates to unemployment. Looking at the factors other than the reason that they're not no longer employed could potentially be a conformity issue. For the

impact on the fund, there are employers who pay in premiums and have experience rated charges and reimbursable employers, who are not insured. For reimbursable employers, they are billed for the benefits and have to pay the ESD back. Examples were given of public employers where they would have to reimburse ESD for benefits paid.

**Persons Testifying:** PRO: Senator Marcus Riccelli, Prime Sponsor; Anne Paxton, Unemployment Law Projexr; Amy Traub, National Employment Law Project; Jan Michael Abapo; Rachel Ybarra, Starbucks Workers United; Jose Martinez, United Farm Workers; Brenda Wiest, Teamsters local 117; Alex Hufstetler, IBEW Local 46; Karyna Babaiants, SEIU Local 6; Joe Kendo, Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO; Jan Michael Abapo, Machinists District Lodge 751; Pearl Johnson, UNITE HERE Local 8; Andrew Stinson, Association of Flight Attendants, CWA Local 19.

CON: Elizabeth New, Washington Policy Center; Patrick Connor, NFIB; Mike Ennis, BIAW; Amber Carter, WA Retail Association; Cory Shaw, Washington Aggregates & Concrete Association; Lindsey Hueer, Association of Washington Business; Julia Gorton, Washington Hospitality Association; Sarah Clark, Seattle Chamber of Commerce; Neil Strege, WA Roundtable.

OTHER: Dan Zeitlin, Employment Security; Josh Dye, ESD.

**Persons Signed In To Testify But Not Testifying:**

CON: Roland Bonser; Scott Hooper; JENNIFER HUMBLE, MOTION ENGINEERING & FABRICATION; Carolyn Logue, Washington Food Industry Association; rochelle marsh; Brent Bair; Joseph Lembo; Jeff Clement; Mary Urban; Jacquie Roach; Jeremy Underwood; Nick Marin; Kelsey Van Miert, Northwest Health Care Linen; Becky Barnhart, Integrus Architecture; Tim Smith; John Kemler, RBK Manufacturing; Rob Fritz; Brian Trimble, Herzog Family Center; Stefanie Peterson; Kendra James; NICOLETTE WEGNER, Chinook Enterprises; Howard Rew; Robert Price, Price Cold Storage & Packing Co; Tom James; Christopher Hannon, Watson Furniture Group; Phillip Selmer; Katherine Seward, SUPERIOR LINEN SERVICE; Dennis Flabetich ; Wes Davis; Sharon Royne; Darin Willis; Craig Leuthold, Maryhill Winery; Teri M Zimmerman; Allison Budvarson, Out of the Box Manufacturing; Janice Stephens; Ryan Umstatted ; Andy Barth, Inland Power & Light; Heather Burgess; Michael Shea, Summit Salon Academy; Kari Magill; Frederick Hoffman; Marc Gonchar; John Snedeker, Salmon Terminals ; Craig Parkinson, Individual; Lewis Ralph; Shannon Hoffee, Wide Hollow Development; bill kaczmarek; Shannon Oakley; David Zemek; Joseph Carman; Robert Vixie, Cowiche Growers, Inc.; ROBERT HOLLAND, Insure with Bob, Inc.; TJ Houk; Doran Docken, Databar inc; LaTisha Robinson, Precision Turf Equipment, LLC; Jared Laprise, JB Emerging Tech Solutions; Mackenzie Del Valle; Len Zarelli ; MICHELLE REEVES, Reliable Electric; MAYLENE FISHER; Preston Dunn, Zemek Construction; Alex Fong, Signarama Redmond, WA; Jason Irving; Dory Chase, Simpson Door Company; Christopher Burgess; JAMES BOBST, VICE PRESIDENT, CORPORATE RELATIONS; jim powers; Rosemary Brester; Wendy Marsolek; Lawrence Shaw, NorMed; Nguyen Ta, Tetra Pak; curtis evanenko; Bill Symmes;

TRACEY MOREN; Craig Griffith; Corey Rogers, Ward Rugh, Inc.; Kathy Scanlan, Northwest Abrasives, LLC; Josh Jorgensen, Mission Ridge Ski & Board Resort; Mary Morgan; Michele Willms, Associated General Contractors of Washington (AGC); SUE WALKER, Toscanos Cafe and Wine Bar; Christina Hodgson; Kevin Robertson; Mason Hudson; Thomas Simmons, True Light Electric; Thomas Dooley, HighLine Grain Growers, Inc.; Julie Richards; Troy Lautenbach, 13084 Ball rd; Toby Sutton; Melissa Slaughter, Group Solutions Northwest LLC; Miker Mayer; kamran rahman; Doug Bobay; Mark Hansen; douglas simpson, ballard sheet metal works, inc.; Susanna Simpson; Robin Korthuis, Lynden Family Physical Therapy; Prescott Tuesley; Kimberly Carpenter; Jennifer Ziegler, Aerospace Futures Alliance; Rodney Hill; Brian Morrish, Morrish Design Group; John Levenda; Harry Thetford, Sound Earthworks, Inc.; MIRIAM DAVIS.

OTHER: Meenakshi Rani, G4 Telecom.