

# A local laborer's take on the U.S. Supreme Court ruling against AFSCME

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WOOD RIVER – After the United States Supreme Court ruled against the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Wednesday morning, many politicians and special interest groups across the State of Illinois have issued statements both for and against the ruling.

Local laborer, Randy Harris, who is a member of Laborers' Local #338 in Wood River, and also represents the Midwestern region of Laborers' International Union of North

America (LIUNA), which represents as many as 50,000 workers in 10 states, stated the ruling is yet another method to “hamstring” unions, adding this specific ruling will affect public sector unions more than private ones such as his own.

Under the ruling, the United States Supreme Court ruled in favor of Mark Janus, an Illinois State Government non-union employee, against AFSCME. Under Illinois State law, if the majority of workers support a union, then that union will represent them in all contract negotiations. This means employees who exercise their rights to not join the union will still have to pay some dues to cover the collective bargaining cost. After this ruling, however, people who opt out of joining the union will no longer have to pay those dues, despite enjoying the collective bargaining and worker protections provided by the union.

Harris described Wednesday's ruling as “a political decision all the way through,” saying it was an “attempt by right-wing Republicans to prevent workers from getting together.”

“This will harm workers,” he said. “That is what it is and what it was intended to do. National Right-to-Work movements supported it, and right-wing groups are pushing further and further to drive wages down. It's a race to the bottom.

“If you get services from a union, you don't have to pay for them now,” Harris continued. “Unions are now legally required to represent you, and you don't have to pay for it. It is illegal to make people join a union. People are free to opt out, but even if they opt out, they would pay about 78 percent of what a union member would pay. They did not have to pay initiation or political or charity fees – they were merely paying the cost of administration and servicing contracts. Free-loaders will now benefit from the services unions bring without paying for them. All this was intended to do is drive down the benefits of unions and destroy the benefits of working people.”

In order to combat this, Harris said workers will have to “stick together,” adding he knows “everyone would like to get something for free, but people need to have some sort of value staked in what is given.”

After this ruling, Harris said unions in Illinois's public sector may suffer, because he said people will inevitably opt out of paying for representation they will get for free anyway under the law. Due to that, he said the services provided by unions will suffer until they potentially become a thing of the past for people laboring for the Illinois government's institutions.

As of now, due to the issue being cited as a First Amendment one under the U.S. Supreme Court, Harris said not much can be done to overturn the ruling – save for

replacing the entire Supreme Court. In the future, however, he said such issues could be prevented through both worker solidarity and political activism.

“We have to do a better job in demonstrating values provided to workers,” he said. “I think it's a significant value, even in places not showing it outwardly, people get it. There's not a whole lot you can do unless you get a new Supreme Court. The best thing you can do is vote – stay involved in politics and go vote. That's how we got here, people did not go vote. They stayed home and thought everything was going to be fine. If you're angry, don't sit at home and stew about it or complain on Facebook. Go out there and get something done.”

Harris compared the U.S. Supreme Court ruling to disliking a mayor of a town after an election and declining to pay taxes.

“Since I don't like the mayor, I'm not going to pay property taxes, but I'll still expect amenities,” he said, hypothetically. “I'll use all the services the city provides, and expect the police to come when I call them, and the fire department to come if my house is on fire, and I'll go out and enjoy the parks and everything, but I won't pay for any of it.”

Over the last 40 years, Harris said organized labor has been on a steady decline. He said he is hopeful, however, because union membership has increased in Missouri and Indiana, despite each being a Right-to-Work state. He said Illinois, which has traditionally favored unions, has maintained a steady membership despite national declines.

“People talk about 'Big Labor,’” Harris said, “but when you're only 10 percent of the workforce, it's tough to say unions are ruining the economy.”

Harris also provided a study conducted by Frank Manzo IV, MPP of the Illinois Economic Policy Institute and Robert Bruno, PhD, of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, called “After *Janus*.”

According to that study, the ruling strikes a 41-year-old precedent called *Abood v. Detroit Board of Education*, 1977. That ruling required public sector workers represented by a labor union to pay for the collective bargaining work that the union performs on their behalf. This ruling would affect at least five million state and local government workers represented by collective bargaining agreements across 23 states and the District of Columbia.

The study asserts overturning *Abood* would both shrink the economy and public sector wages. It also posited the *Janus* decision would impose lasting changes on the labor movement through Right-to-Work policies.

Here are the points the study concluded:

- Annual economic activity in the United States would drop by between \$11.7 billion and \$33.4 billion.
- The wages of state and local government employees would decrease by 3.6 percent on average, resulting in a \$1,810 loss in wage and salary income per worker.
- The salaries of public school teachers would drop by 5.4 percent on average.
- The pay penalty for working in state and local government would be exacerbated.
- Union membership rates in state and local governments would be reduced by 8.2 percentage points, which could translate to 726,000 union members over time.
- Decreased public sector unionization by an estimated 189,000 members in California, 136,000 members in New York and 49,000 members in Illinois over time.
- Reduction in union membership rates of PreK-12 and special education teachers by 4.8 percentage points – a projected loss of 88,000 members over time.
- It would disproportionately impact African-American workers, who are more likely to work in state and local government and be union members themselves.