

# From Community Benefits, to Collective Bargaining, and Back

Building Worker Power in Milwaukee



**FROM COMMUNITY BENEFITS, TO COLLECTIVE BARGAINING, AND BACK** is a product of “EARN in the Midwest” project in Wisconsin. The Wisconsin project brings together High Road Strategy Center, Milwaukee Area Service and Hospitality Workers Organization (MASH), and Kids Forward to build worker leadership and develop policy resources and analysis for the city of Milwaukee and the state at large. Wisconsin’s EARN in the Midwest is part of a broader project supported by the EARN Network at the Economic Policy Institute and funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation.

This report is also a product of the Worker-Centered Policies for an Equitable Recovery (WCPER) grant project in Wisconsin. This project is headed by Kids Forward, an anti-racist statewide policy center that advocates for the well-being of children and families living in Wisconsin. The project brings together partner organizations across the state to develop a community-reflective, anti-austerity state policy agenda that reflects the needs of communities of color and low-income workers. The Wisconsin WCPER grant project is part of a broader project supported by the EARN Network at the Economic Policy Institute.

# Community Benefits Agreements and Worker Power

Through unions, workers have the power to demand more from their jobs: higher wages, better benefits, and more predictable scheduling. Before workers can see the gains from a good union contract, however, they need union organizing rights and labor peace. Even in a so-called “right to work” state such as Wisconsin, where state policy hobbles unions, workers and organizers can secure effective Community Benefits Agreements that provide labor peace and the right to organize for people employed in downtown development projects in Milwaukee. Rooted in the 2016 Community Benefits Agreement for the Deer District, the Milwaukee Area Service and Worker Organization (MASH) has traveled this road, moving from the private agreement to union representation for Deer District workers in 2019. MASH is continuing to build the power of service workers inside the Deer District and beyond, bargaining stronger standards for work, representing more workers, and demanding accountability from development projects.

This strategy stands in stark contrast to standard practice. From sports and entertainment venues to hotels and corporate offices, downtown development fuels the creation of low-wage, no-benefit, insecure jobs in the service and hospitality industries that employ tens of thousands of Milwaukee’s workers. For too long, employers and policymakers have accepted that the service sector will simply produce bad jobs with high turnover rates. There is an alternative: a community strategy to raise the quality of these jobs that is driven by workers and their unions. This strategy starts with Community Benefits Agreements, which extend a pathway towards further union representation and decent work for service workers in the city.

A good Community Benefits Agreement has the power to deliver a clear road to high-quality, service-sector jobs. These private agreements between developers, labor organizations, and/or community coalitions bring accountability to developers’ evergreen promises of economic development and prosperity for cities. While job quality in the construction industry is often the first labor consideration in development projects, the experience in Milwaukee shows that a good Community Benefits Agreement can improve the lives of working people in end-use service jobs, too.

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In Milwaukee, the 2016 agreement provided job-quality standards but most crucially, it guaranteed labor peace and the path to union representation for service workers. As a result, Milwaukee's landmark Deer District Community Benefits Agreement has driven service-job improvement through union representation. Service workers in Milwaukee now have voice and power in their jobs because they can negotiate wages and benefits, secure improvements in schedule and shift policies, and more.

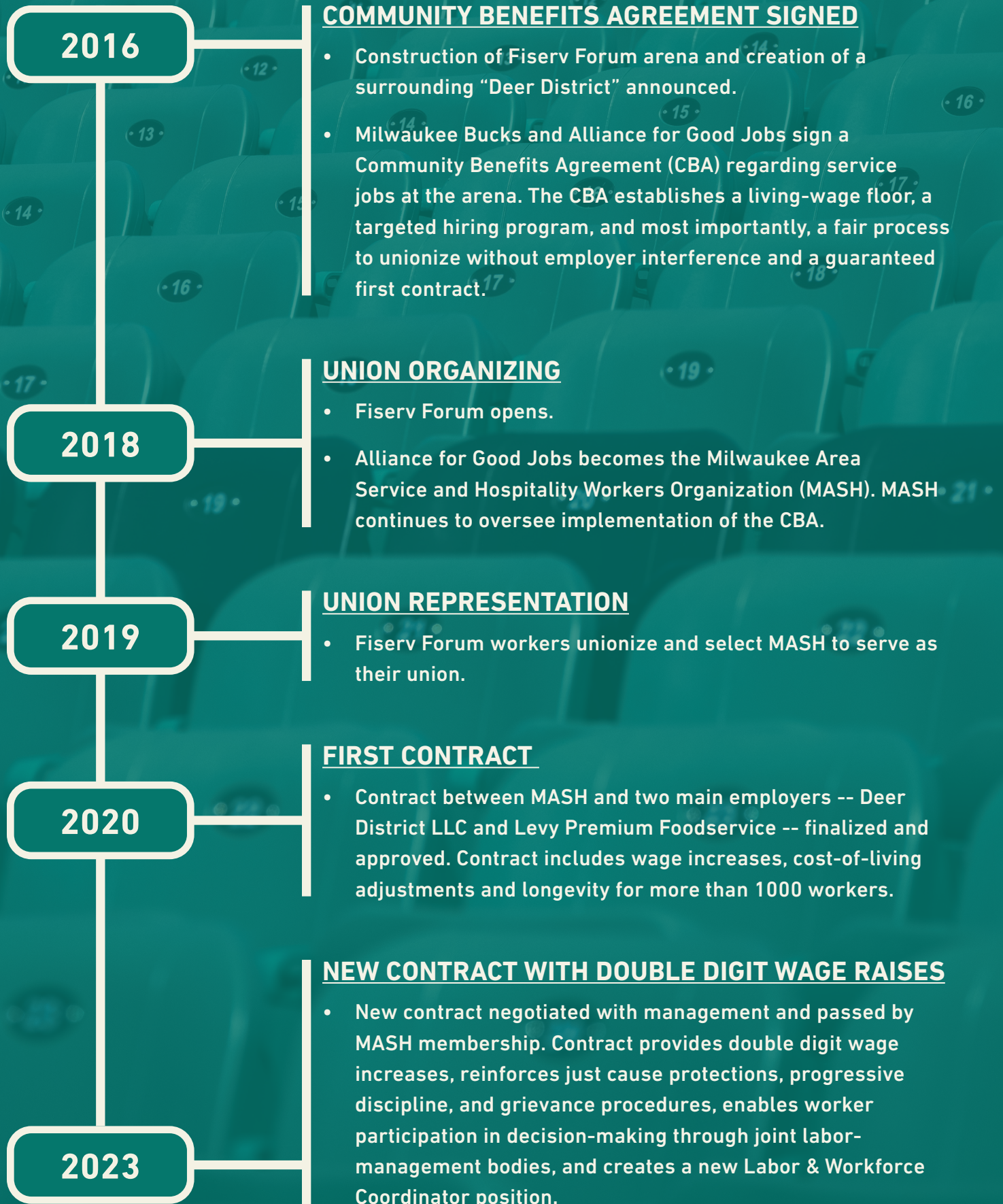
Improving service and hospitality jobs in Milwaukee can redefine the city's economic and social landscape. As with the manufacturing jobs of the previous century, union rights that secure strong union contracts can make these jobs ones in which workers and their families can thrive. The Community Benefits Agreement between the Milwaukee Bucks and the Alliance for Good Jobs established labor peace and provided the space for workers to create their union, the Milwaukee Area Service and Hospitality Workers Organization (MASH), free from employer interference. And MASH, in turn, has been able to negotiate industry-leading job quality standards for workers. MASH continues to lead the fight to ensure new Community Benefits Agreements like the 2016 model are instituted for every future Milwaukee downtown development project. In this way, MASH not only elevates the quality of service jobs in the Deer District, but also expands the model to new areas to raise the floor under service work throughout the region.

This report documents MASH's work to transform Milwaukee's service industry. But to provide a solid foundation for understanding this theory of change for service jobs, we begin with necessary foundational information on Community Benefits Agreements, Collective Bargaining, and Unions in the following section. These concepts are essential to understanding the broader MASH theory of change. After definitions, we discuss MASH's most recent contract and their ongoing work to improve service jobs through contracts, representation, and strong demands for accountability in downtown development. We provide this description of MASH and its growing influence in hopes that it may be adopted and adapted as a route to stronger service jobs in other communities. (For more details on the structure of these jobs in the industry, see [Facts from the Frontline and The Crisis in Milwaukee's Service Jobs](#).)

*“The Community Benefits Agreement between the Milwaukee Bucks and the Alliance for Good Jobs established labor peace and provided the space for workers to create their union, the Milwaukee Area Service and Hospitality Workers Organization (MASH), free from employer interference.”*



## FIGURE 1: Project Timeline



# What Makes a Good Community Benefits Agreement?

As we have noted before, not all Community Benefits Agreements are alike. A **good** Community Benefits Agreement is an enforceable, legally-binding private agreement between a developer and a strong community organization or coalition on the impact of a development project. Without a binding agreement, the developer is not accountable for assertions and promises made regarding the benefits associated with a development project. Having enforceable commitments obligates project developers and their proponents to follow through.

But equally important, a **good** Community Benefits Agreement **necessarily** focuses on the service jobs that will result from a project and **provides a pathway to union representation** for workers who will work in those jobs. Community Benefits Agreements often focus on the terms or conditions for end-use jobs within these development areas, e.g., wages and targeted hiring. A good Community Benefits Agreement also stipulates labor peace from developers and employers so that workers can organize, which enables them to secure durable power and voice in the jobs created by development. For more on Community Benefits Agreements, refer to our previous publication, [Worker Power Levels the Playing Field](#).



## The Union Difference

Through unions, workers secure higher wages and gain a collective avenue for power and voice in determining the structure of their jobs. Workers covered by union contracts earn over 10% more than workers in comparable occupations, worksites, and with similar levels of education. Contracts also provide workers with voice in issues like scheduling, benefits, discipline, and advancement. Workers covered by union contracts are not at-will employees, but instead subject to a “just cause” standard-- employers need good reasons to discipline or terminate workers. Though wages and benefits tend to get top billing with union contracts – and rightly so because of their significant material impact – issues around job security, shift schedules, and discipline are substantially better in union worksites as well.

Perhaps most importantly, through the bargaining process and elections, union workers have direct influence on the priorities of their union and the day-to-day issues at work. Unions are created by workers and necessarily responsive to worker priorities. The collective voice and priorities of workers are developed and expressed in the negotiation process, creating greater worksite cohesion and an infrastructure for mutual problem solving.

Many of the advantages of union work are experienced by union members themselves. But as the power of unions grows, the benefits to workers can spill out to non-union workers as well. This was demonstrated this summer when Toyota raised wages at its (non-union) US plants right after the UAW won new contracts for work in union auto manufacturing. This effect can run through local labor markets as well, as employers respond to wage standards in union jobs or seek to reduce their own workers' interest in unionization.

For more on unions in Wisconsin, see [WorkingWI.org/unions](http://WorkingWI.org/unions).

## Collective Bargaining

Collective bargaining is the process by which workers, through their unions, negotiate the terms of their work – pay, benefits, hours, working conditions, workplace policies and more. Where workers do not have unions, employers have more expansive power to set terms and conditions of work and to arbitrarily change rules. When workers bargain, they gain power and jointly determine material terms and conditions of employment.

The process of bargaining begins with the formation of the collective bargaining unit, a legally sanctioned group of workers who seek representation and act together through their union. Once a bargaining unit has been formed, workers create a bargaining committee with workers from the unit typically accompanied by professional union staff who negotiate with the employer. Actual negotiations can take place over several rounds of bargaining. Once an agreement is made between the bargaining unit and management, the contract is brought back to the union membership for ratification. In this process, the tentative agreement reached by the bargaining committee is reviewed by union members. Generally, a majority vote in favor of the contract is required to ratify it and put it into effect.

Contracts tend to last for a set period before they re-open for negotiation. Renegotiation of the collective bargaining agreement gives unions the chance to raise standards in line with changes in the cost of living, labor market, and other factors that affect the livelihoods of working people. Without a binding contract, employers are not required to attend to these issues.



## A Contract To Build Worker Power

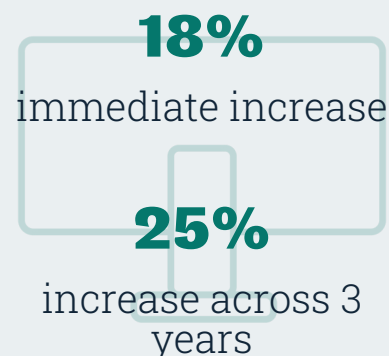
The 2016 Community Benefits Agreement provided labor peace and a pathway to union representation for workers in the “Deer District,” the business district that includes Fiserv Forum and adjacent venues. The agreement’s key provision guaranteed a free and fair process for service workers within the Deer District to organize and join their union without employer interference. Seizing this opportunity, nearly 1,000 hospitality and service workers unionized, creating and formalizing their power through MASH in 2019. In early 2020, the first union contracts between MASH and the Milwaukee Bucks and their subcontractors (primarily food service operator Levy Restaurants) established industry-leading job-standards for workers in the Deer District. Since then, **wages have more than doubled for represented workers**. Additionally, MASH continues to work with employers to build stronger systems of job assignment and cross training to improve work schedules and increase hours of work for members.

In 2023, contract renewal negotiations began for MASH. Two bargaining committees were formed by union members. The first bargaining committee negotiated the contract for nearly 500 security guards, janitors, and event staff employed directly by the Milwaukee Bucks. The second committee negotiated the new contract for some 500 cooks, cashiers, servers, bartenders, and other hospitality workers employed by Levy Restaurants in the district. MASH members ratified the new contracts in August and September 2023.

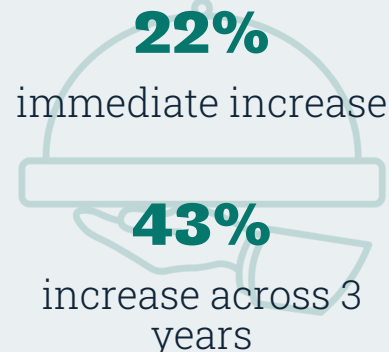
Wage increases for workers across classifications were substantial. Figure 2 illustrates both the immediate wage increases for a theoretical new hire across three different classifications -- Guest Service Representatives, Catering, and Concessions Cooks. In all three classifications, workers will see immediate increases of at least 13 percent and up to 22 percent in catering. Across the contract, those wages will continue to advance with wages up by more than 25% for each of these three classifications.

**FIGURE 2**  
Theoretical New Hire's  
Wage Increases

### GUEST SERVICE REPRESENTATIVE



### CATERING SERVER



### CONCESSIONS COOK





Beyond wages, the recent contracts fundamentally transformed work and created a new charter for hospitality and service-industry jobs with sections for the following:

- **Just Cause:** Employer policies, procedures, and rules must be reasonable and subject to objective review, and they must be applied fairly, with due process (including discipline).
- **Progressive Discipline/Coaching:** Transparent structure of discipline focused upon coaching and improvement, not punishment.
- **Grievance Procedure:** Mechanism for contract provisions and rights to be upheld through successive steps of a binding, quasi-legal process from frontline management to senior leadership.
- **Employee Voice:** Workers participate in decision-making about their jobs through joint labor-management bodies; workers represented in process determining and applying rules, policies and procedures, including if subject to discipline.
- **Work Access:** Scheduling and hours governed by transparent, rational framework and objective criteria; jobs and hours protected from arbitrary whims.

These aspects of the contract provide a new model for service work and transform non-wage conditions of employment, showing that union representation for service workers can be a pathway to wage standards, but also to reimagining the work itself.

Additionally, both 2023 contracts included management investment in MASH to improve scheduling and work assignment systems for workers. The contracts create new capacity at MASH, paid for via management funding, where a Labor and Workforce Coordinator will navigate employer demand and worker interest in better schedules. The union will be able to mobilize workers for available shifts, analyze and plan for workforce challenges, and implement new solutions to scheduling issues. This approach creates more steady employment and reduces worksite turnover to address perpetual problems within the service industry. This work puts MASH at the center of solving the employer's need for workers in ways that improve jobs for members.

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## Transforming the Service Industry

Through MASH, workers in the Deer District have secured real gains through bargaining and enforcement of their contract and have also begun to transform the local service and hospitality labor market. Workers at half a dozen other event and entertainment venues have joined or are seeking to join MASH, including those with the Pabst Theater Group who joined MASH in 2022. MASH pushes local government officials to extend this model for new developments and works with developers on community benefits agreements.

Because so much of the employment in these sectors defaults to part-time work, MASH workers have identified the three priorities inside their worksites and for the broader industry as well. First, Milwaukee must raise the floor under service work. MASH's recent contracts prove what is possible in the service sector. MASH is focused on bargaining, union, and community organizing in ways that can raise standards for these jobs. Second, MASH workers have prioritized innovations that can increase hours of work and stability of their employment. Volatility of demand in the leisure and hospitality sector has been carried by workers and jobs and schedules have degraded so much that workers don't have the stability they need to thrive. This is a priority of the workers, and MASH work with employers to rationalize and improve scheduling and cross-training in response provides another model of what is possible with these jobs. Finally, MASH workers are prioritizing benefits. These jobs have weak benefits structures and MASH contracts have begun to rebuild a floor of access to benefits that workers want. Still, there is a way to go, and MASH will continue to work on this both in public policy and in ongoing bargaining.

In pursuing these priorities, MASH is working in three different ways. First, MASH is a traditional **union** – it represents workers, bargains contracts, seeks to organize new worksites. This work is evident in strong contracts for workers in the Deer District and increasing membership in the union. At the same time, MASH is working as a “**workforce intermediary**” or a hiring hall as well. By building internal capacity to schedule and assign work, MASH is solving the simultaneous problems of management and workers. This is “win/win” work that will create stronger jobs for workers and a stronger labor force for management. The investment of

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management in MASH to work to solve this problem is evidence of the mutual interest in the solution, and the unique capacity of MASH to solve it. Finally, MASH is also working as a force for **development accountability** throughout downtown Milwaukee. When developers seek public support for their ideas, MASH is there, reminding public officials that development must, and can, provide decent service jobs, but only where workers have a right to unionization.

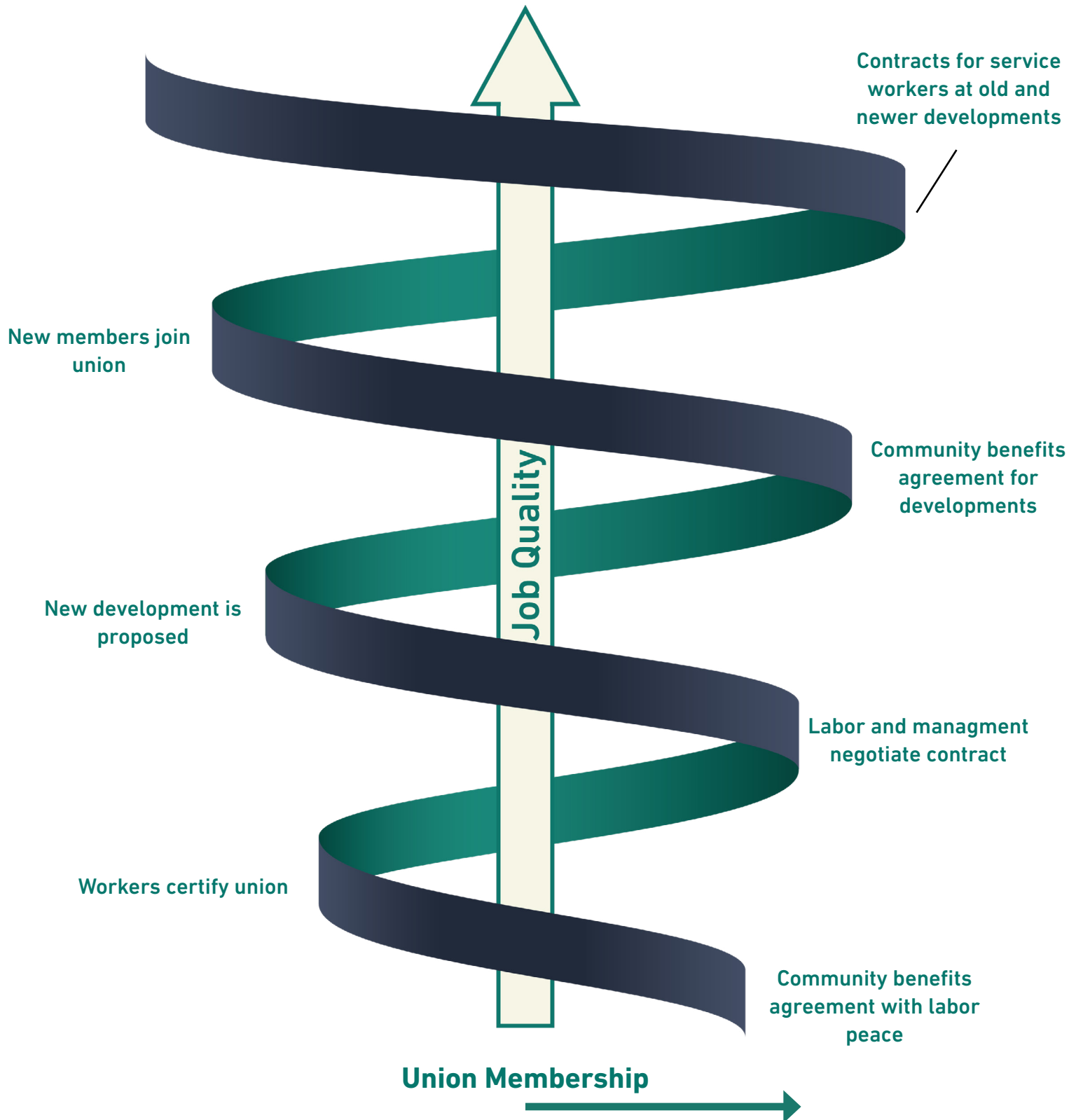
These strategies are simultaneous and mutually reinforcing. The success of the MASH's union work demonstrates the possibility and necessity of a higher floor under service work, provides members with better pay and voice on the job, and builds a more unified voice for service workers. The success of MASH's work as an intermediary proves that strategies to improve the work pays off for both employers and workers. And the focus on accountability of development will secure strong Community Benefits Agreements for future projects. As those projects employ workers, MASH will be there to organize and represent workers in new sites and continue to build the floor under service work in the city.

This virtuous cycle is represented in Figure 3. The cycle begins with a strong Community Benefits Agreement which then proceeds to the certification of the union and ratification of contracts. As the power of the service workers grows, their union secures stronger contracts for workers, and ensures that more Community Benefits Agreements are structured into future development. As the cycle continues, more service workers are represented by unions and the job quality in the service sector rises. This is the specific theory of change of MASH but it can also be generalized to other locations.

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**FIGURE 3: How Community Benefits Agreements & Service Worker Unions Raise Job Quality**



## Conclusion

Economic development will continue to come to downtown Milwaukee. MASH's work provides both the model and the infrastructure to leverage these projects and raise service industry standards throughout the city. Building on the work of defining and enforcing the original Deer District Community Benefits Agreement, MASH has demonstrated that the city does not have to hand over cash or tax breaks whenever developers demand public money or investment. Development should be welcomed only when jobs created allow workers living wages, strong benefits, and a voice in shaping their work. Good private Community Benefits Agreements can provide public leaders assurance that public support of development can lead to public good. Milwaukee has the model and the union, and this is creating momentum to raise service-sector standards throughout downtown. In this way, MASH brings real accountability to development projects. The potential of this model reaches far beyond Milwaukee. This model has lessons for any region grappling with unaccountable economic development, poor job quality in services, and racial inequality. Community Benefits Agreements that build in labor peace and help create stronger unionization are one way to begin building a self-reinforcing cycle of improvement of the service sector. New development projects can provide public leaders the opportunity to build more lasting improvements to jobs. But this requires attention to supporting the development of unions in the service sector.

## Work Cited

1. [Unions are not only good for workers, they're good for communities and for democracy](#)
2. [Collective Bargaining | AFL-CIO](#)
3. [The 5 Stages of Collective Bargaining | NEA](#)

# EARN in the Midwest Collaboration

The Milwaukee Service and Hospitality Workers Organization (MASH), High Road Strategy Center, and Kids Forward are working to transform service work across Wisconsin. The following series of reports address ongoing economic issues throughout the state, from Community Benefit Agreements to unions.

## **The Crisis in Milwaukee's Service Industry**

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, service work in Milwaukee was characterized by low wages, inadequate and often unpredictable hours, and weak benefit packages. This report calls on the City of Milwaukee to lead efforts in strengthening job quality, raising labor standards, and support and build a high-road approach to service work.

## **Playing with Public Money in Milwaukee: Data, Context, and Questions on Soccer Stadiums**

In May 2022, Kenosha-based Bear Development and Kacmarcik Enterprises released a development plan for an "Iron District" on the southwestern end of downtown Milwaukee. This paper provides Milwaukee residents and political leaders background information and additional context as this proposal is considered, offering an overview of relevant research on the economic impact of sports arenas and information on recent public investment in soccer stadiums in five other cities.

## **Worker Power Levels the Playing Field: Community Benefits for Public Subsidies in the Iron District**

In May 2022, Kenosha-based Bear Development and Kacmarcik Enterprises released a development plan for an "Iron District" on the southwestern end of downtown Milwaukee. In *Playing with Public Money in Milwaukee*, we took a closer look at the economic impacts of sports arenas subsidized with public funds in cities across the country. Now, in this second entry in our work surrounding the Iron District development, we look into Community Benefits Agreements (CBAs) – their history, what makes them effective, and their key role in securing true economic returns from large-scale private developments to the working people of Milwaukee.

## **Facts from the Frontline: Getting By in Milwaukee's Abundant Low Wage Service Jobs**

In the past 40 years, the union, manufacturing jobs that abounded in Milwaukee have been replaced by low-wage, non-union service jobs, exacerbating racial and economic disparity. Properly addressing the intertwined issues of declining manufacturing jobs and unions, and growing racial disparity starts with restructuring the city's service sector. In this report, we take a deep look into the city's service jobs across multiple industries and occupations. We also hear from workers themselves what is empowering them, and what remains unaddressed, on the city's economic frontlines.



## About High Road Strategy Center

High Road Strategy Center is a nonprofit think-and-do tank, based at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, that promotes “high road” solutions to social problems. These treat shared growth and opportunity, environmental sustainability, and resilient democratic institutions as necessary and achievable complements in human development. Through our various projects, we work with cities around the country to promote innovation and the implementation of high road policy. High Road Strategy Center is nonpartisan but values-based. We seek a world of equal opportunity and security for all.

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**HIGH ROAD**  
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Democracy

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