Honoring Fallen Workers with Action

By U.S. Senator Tammy Baldwin

As I write this, I’m on the road heading back from meeting some incredible and inspirational Wisconsin workers and first responders a day after the deeply frightening and shocking explosion at the oil refinery in Superior. The explosion and fire injured 20 workers, but we’re incredibly lucky that no lives were lost that day.

As the smoke continued to billow and hang over the entire city, it served as a sober reminder of the dangers faced every day by Wisconsin workers and the bravery of our first responders.

And just a few days after this incident, we will observe Workers Memorial Day. On this day, we must not only remember and honor those who have been injured or lost their lives on the job, but also recommit ourselves to fighting for workers safety and defend the hard-won victories of working Wisconsinites.

There is no question that Wisconsin workers are the best in the world. But too often, they are not afforded the protections they deserve. And too often, they have paid the ultimate price.

Thanks to solidarity among workers, we have made incredible strides forward for worker safety, but more must be done. One Wisconsin worker’s death is one too many.

In America, over 5,000 workers were killed on the job in 2016. Over 100 of those life-ending injuries happened right here in Wisconsin. That’s simply unacceptable.

And that fight for workers safety is one we must take on every day.

Thanks to the bravery of a whistleblower, I was alerted that industrial barrel recycling plants in the Milwaukee area were exposing workers to hazardous materials and dangerous working environments.

The reports were yet another disturbing reminder that we must remain ever vigilant in ensuring workers’ safety and well being.

Since then I’ve called for investigations into these plants by EPA, OSHA and other government agencies that must step-up and protect Wisconsin workers.

Investigations are not enough though. The current unsafe environments in workplaces around the country are due to years of powerful corporate special interests pushing for more lax worker protections. That status quo must change.

That is why I have introduced the Protecting America’s Workers Act.

My bill will update the Occupational Safety and Health Act, which was first passed back in 1970. A lot has changed since then and we’re past due for significant updates to cover more workers, strengthen protections and hold bad actors who break the law and harm workers accountable.

I’ve pushed the government to act, but current law only allows prosecutors to issue mere misdemeanors, even when there are willful violations that result in the death of a Wisconsin worker. My legislation would change that and also make sure workers won’t lose their jobs if they file a complaint.

If you know anything about Washington though, you’ll know that it is going to take a lot of hard work to get this job done. Washington is a mess and in all that chaos, it’s Wisconsin workers that get hurt as special interests continue to call the shots.
These powerful special interests know that I’m putting Wisconsin workers first. That’s why they have already spent nearly $10 million to defeat me this year.

But no matter how much outside groups pour into attack ads in Wisconsin, I’ll continue to take on anyone and stand up for Wisconsin workers.

That is why I hope we will take this Workers Memorial Day to not only remember those we lost, but honor their lives with action.

Together, we can work to overcome special interests’ grip on Washington and push for reforms that protect and empower Wisconsin workers.

Worker safety is headed in the wrong direction in Wisconsin, as the amount of workers who die on the job keeps moving upward.

“More than 150 workers died last year, more than any year I can remember,” said Kevin Gundlach, SCFL president, at the annual commemoration of Workers Memorial Day held this year at Christ Presbyterian Church in Madison.

Chad Greenwood, from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA), presented an even bigger picture by telling the audience of predominantly union labor stalwarts that we lose 5,000 per year nationally. “That’s 14 per day,” he said. “One is too many.”

Wisconsin State representative Lisa Subeck explained why. “We have seen a dismantling of our laws which protect workers.” She also laid the blame squarely on Act 10, which decimated Wisconsin’s public sector unions.

“No one knows better than our workers how to keep our workplaces safe,” she said. Keeping workers from bargaining those protections has had a predictable effect in decreasing worker safety.

Doug Keillor, Executive Director of Madison Teachers Inc. added his own startling statistic, pointing out that violence in the workplace is now the number two cause of on-the-job injuries and fatalities. “This is our new reality,” he said, adding that the number one cause was transportation.

Victoria Gutiérrez, a nurse and SEIU member, told the story of a nurse who was pushed beyond her limits and caused a patient to die.

“Our working conditions are our patients’ healing conditions,” she said. She called for Wisconsin to implement safe nurse-to-patient ratios as many other states have done.

State Senator Jon Erpenbach fumed that OSHA had been formed in 1971 and it “makes me sick that we are still talking about this today.”