



## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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## JOINT STATEMENT FROM AFSCME LOCALS 33, 47, & 426:

# MILWAUKEE CITY WORKERS DECLARE SAFETY EMERGENCY OVER HAZARDOUS SMOKE; DEMAND IMMEDIATE POLICY CHANGE

Today, the City of Milwaukee Workers Unions, representing the thousands of dedicated public servants of AFSCME Locals 33, 47, and 426, are standing together to declare an immediate workplace safety emergency. For the past two and a half days, a historic and life-threatening blanket of toxic wildfire smoke has covered our city. Yet, the city administration has utterly failed to protect the very employees who keep Milwaukee running.

The Presidents of these locals are issuing this press release to directly confront the Mayor, the Common Council, and city administration: **Your frontline workers will no longer endure a patchwork, reactive management style that treats our health as an afterthought.**

"Our members were forced to drive into work today just to sit in vehicles and smoke-filled offices, waiting for a decision that should have been made days ago," the Presidents of AFSCME Locals 33, 47, and 426 said in a joint statement. "The administration has proven time and time again that it is incapable of acting quickly to protect us. We are taking a stand today to demand the systemic changes necessary to ensure we all make it home healthy to our families."

This crisis is not a surprise. Climate change has caused a severe, documented degradation of our seasonal air quality over the last six years. The city has had ample warning that this threat was escalating:

- **2020 Max AQI:** 169 (Unhealthy)
- **2023 Max AQI:** 270 (Very Unhealthy)
- **2024 Max AQI:** 161 (Unhealthy)
- **2025 Max AQI:** 175 (Unhealthy)

- **2026 Max AQI: 644 (Extreme Hazard / Life-Threatening)**

On July 15, National Weather Service Incident Meteorologist Philip Manuel explicitly warned the public that these wildfire smoke conditions are long-term, noting, *"Odds are, these fires will be here until it snows."*

Despite this clear trajectory, the Department of Public Works (DPW), Parking Enforcement (PE), and the Department of Neighborhood Services (DNS) failed to stage a sensible, rapid response to the health crisis.

Yesterday, July 16, the Milwaukee Health Department issued a public warning urging citizens, especially vulnerable populations, to stay indoors.

*"Mayor Cavalier Johnson and the City of Milwaukee Health Department (MHD) are urging people to limit their exposure to smoky air, especially children, older adults, pregnant people, and those with asthma, COPD, heart disease, or other respiratory conditions. During periods of very poor air quality, even healthy individuals may experience eye irritation, coughing, sore throat, or shortness of breath. "*

Yet, the city's operational departments decided that their own employees should simply suffer through these exact medical hazards:

- **DPW Sanitation Workers** were ordered to report to work and then standby until 9:30 AM while management scrambled for a plan, ultimately sending workers home.
- **Non-Essential Office Workers** who are fully capable of working from home were forced to report to municipal offices filled with smoke due to poorly maintained HVAC systems at the Zeidler Municipal and Lake Tower buildings.
- **DNS Field Inspector** safety was left to a patchwork of individual supervisor whims - some supervisors wisely protected their teams, while others left it up to workers, experiencing pressure to keep their jobs, to risk their health to provide entirely non-emergency services.
- **Milwaukee Water Works Repair division** showed initiative by immediately prioritizing emergency-only dispatches, providing N95 masks, and authorizing time-and-a-half hazard pay. *This must be the absolute minimum response for the entire city. But it does not go far enough. We demand comprehensive, systemic changes.*

## **Our Five Emergency Demands**

The July 31st Common Council meeting is the final session before the August recess. We demand the Mayor, the Common Council, and the labor negotiator collaborate to implement these four safety measures before that deadline:

1. **Emergency Funding for Fitted Respirators:** The Mayor must issue an emergency declaration to free up funds, and the Common Council must approve emergency

allocations before the August recess to procure properly fitted respirators for all essential field-working employees.

2. **Additional Mandatory Breaks During Hazardous Weather:** Respirator use increases cardiovascular strain, core body temperature, and impedes worker hydration. The city must implement policy to allow our workers to find reprieve during extreme heat, extreme cold, and other hazardous conditions rather than leave it up to individual department employee handbooks, or the whims of supervisors or management.
3. **Immediate Year-Round Use of Weather Alert System:** The city must immediately utilize its automated dispatch notification system, the same system used daily for winter snow operations, to alert city workers to stay home whenever the AQI, inclement weather, or temperature extremes cross into unhealthy thresholds.
4. **A Clear, City-Wide Environmental Policy:** We demand a unified, blanket policy that codifies exactly what AQI levels trigger a work stoppage, standardizes hazard pay codes, and explicitly outlines which specific roles are exceptions for emergency work. Safety rules cannot be left to a chaotic, patchwork layout of department heads.
5. **Volunteer Swaps & Health Protections for Vulnerable Workers:** Workers whose non-emergency shifts are cancelled must be given the option to volunteer for emergency crews at time-and-a-half pay. Crucially, our coworkers with underlying health issues, and our older, more experienced workforce must be allowed to swap field positions with healthy volunteers, preserving their health so they can safely reach their hard-earned, fully vested retirements.

We make this city function every single day. We expect our health, our safety, and our lives to be treated with the basic dignity we have earned.

In Solidarity,

Veneasha Youngblood-Campbell  
President, AFSCME Local 33

Ian Gunther  
President, AFSCME Local 47

Phyllis Whitley  
President, AFSCME Local 426

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***About the City of Milwaukee Workers Unions:*** AFSCME Locals 33, 47, and 426 represent the general city employees of Milwaukee, including infrastructure, water works, sanitation, neighborhood services, city development, public works, the assessors' office, ports, sewers, administrative staff, and other departments who keep the City of Milwaukee operating safely and efficiently.