

# Jennifer Epps-Addison

Executive Director, Wisconsin Jobs Now | Milwaukee, Wisconsin

***“There’s a huge cultural shift ... when regular folks are empowered to become leaders.”***

Leading by developing and following the leadership of workers

*Attorney Jennifer Epps-Addison has been an organizer for almost 15 years and has an accomplished history of playing a central role in winning campaigns, such as in-state tuition for children of undocumented parents and paid sick days. As head of Wisconsin Jobs Now, a nonprofit organization committed to tackling income inequality, she led a campaign that helped pass a living wage ordinance through the Milwaukee County Board. In 2013, political commentator Bill Moyers named her an Activist to Watch. She also blogs for the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel’s Purple Wisconsin section, which offers views from across the political spectrum.*

*Epps-Addison loves developing community members into leaders as much as she does winning campaigns. And this could not be more important than in a place like Milwaukee. African American economic progress has faltered as jobs disappeared amid globalization and a shift toward putting corporate profits before people. In 1970, the median African American family income in Milwaukee was 19 percent higher than the national median family income for African Americans. Decades later, there has been almost a complete reversal. According to a recent report from National Public Radio, Milwaukee is one of the worst cities to live in for African Americans. The city has the highest rate of residential segregation in the United States. And Wisconsin is the state with the highest rate of African American male prisoners and the highest achievement gap between African American and white students in the country. Despite these daunting challenges, the members of Wisconsin Jobs Now are standing up and leading change.*



RAISE ★ UP  
MIKE

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I spent most of my organizing career being the only person of color in the room making decisions at the strategy table. So it was really important to me that we weren’t just putting people in front of the cameras, but we were deeply investing in their growth and their leadership. I wanted them to have ownership over the campaigns. That model really has proven itself. One hundred percent of the people in our organizing department are former union members—activists, leaders or workers.

There’s a huge cultural shift when regular folks are empowered to become leaders. It is really instructive for traditional labor organizations that are still struggling to figure out how to diversify their ranks at the top levels of leadership, and then figure out how to help those leaders be successful. Our organization has really built a strong model of doing that.

A lot of times we try to bring campaigns back to our communities from top level strategy meetings, and they’re not excited about them because the focus is on reaching this number or that number, this goal or that goal.

We ran a referendum in the last election around raising the minimum wage to \$10.10 and we got

a lot of pushback from our members who have been leading Fight for \$15, a national campaign aimed at increasing the minimum wage at fast-food restaurants to \$15 an hour. It really struck me when one of our employees—Miss Mary, who is almost in her 60s and works at Popeye’s—said to me, “You know, Jenn, we didn’t join this fight to become less poor; we joined this fight cause we really believe that we’re worth more.”

I thought that was such a powerful statement and a reminder that when you give people an aspiration and keep them engaged, they’re not limited by what those in the political class or organizing elite think is possible. And that’s what moves people. That’s what gets people excited. It’s why we’ve seen such an incredible growth in Fight for \$15. Folks are out in the streets taking direct action, they are really responsible for changing the entire conversation in our country.

If you look at that movement, the majority of those leaders are young people of color. A lot are young women, black women in particular.

Black women are already organizers because of the role that we play in our families and in our communities. That’s exactly the same role that we should be playing in labor and community

organizations. If you look at labor, black women are the ones who are coming in to volunteer for the phone banks. They're the ones who are coming to knock on doors in the neighborhoods during elections. They're the ones who are taking the time out of their schedules to show up at hearings because they affect their lives. Despite all this, they rarely are the ones running for leadership positions, sitting on executive councils, or even applying for the organizing jobs in this industry.

Black women need to trust our leadership abilities. We need support systems and to connect to other black women and other women of color who are trying to make change and create space and access to labor organizations. And we need to challenge ourselves to not just be the workers and the doers, but to actually step out in front and feel empowered as leaders.

It's important to recognize that even as we see labor shifting and transitioning and growing, there is still racism in labor. There are still those unspoken rules and the blacklisting that happens when you are too forthright or push too hard

to open a discussion about race. It is really important to have the ability to identify with folks like you and build some collective voices around the changes, the shifts, and the transitions that need to happen to make labor accessible to everyone.

We need to really demand, as black leaders in labor, some intentional space to discuss things like race. We need to discuss resources that go into our communities; the decision-making around how money is spent; which campaigns we're choosing; and how we're investing and growing the base. All of those things—all of those decisions, those strategic questions—need to be opened up to a wider group of black women who deserve a seat at the table.

It's not just black women's responsibility to address those issues or to figure out the solutions, it is all of labor's collective responsibility. We want to build a stronger union. And if we want to truly build a movement that has the capacity to win in our current climate, it means that black women have to be fully invested in it.

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