

Central Ohio needs a DOL that protects workers

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A weakened Department of Labor led by a hostile secretary could have devastating consequences for Columbus workers. An outsized portion of the city's residents hold low-paid service jobs – especially in the fast food and restaurant industry. These workers need a raise and need to be protected from unfair and unsafe employer practices. The Department of Labor is often the last line of defense for working families.

By some measures, Columbus is a bright spot in the state's economic recovery, but just below the surface lies deep inequity that could be made worse by eroding worker protections. Fast-food workers, cashiers and restaurant servers account for about 7 percent of Columbus employment – or about 80,000 people. These jobs pay a wage so low that a full-time, year-round worker earning the median wage can't keep a family of three out of poverty. Seven of the ten largest occupations in Columbus pay so little that a full-time, year-round worker earning the median wage is probably eligible for food assistance.

Good public policy could offer real improvements for working families in Central Ohio. The now stalled update of the federal overtime rule would have helped 351,000 Ohio workers get paid for all the hours they work. Increasing the minimum wage to \$12 by 2021 would give a raise to 88,000 Columbus workers – including one out of every four working women. At least one parent of 67,000 Columbus kids would get a raise from a minimum wage increase. The overwhelming majority of Columbus workers who would get a raise are adults (85.7 percent) struggling to raise and provide for their families, not teens working summer jobs.

Over the last two years 53 Columbus employers violated federal wage and hour protections. These claims covered more than 1,000 workers and resulted in more than \$822,000 in back pay awards and civil penalties. The violations occurred in low-wage industries like food services but also in nursing care facilities, hospitals, construction and power distribution. Wage enforcement and worker health and safety protections are certainly needed in the service sector and the low-wage economy, but violations occur across industries and incomes. A weakened Department of Labor puts all workers at risk.

State policy has been at best weak and at worst a barrier to protecting working people. The Ohio legislature recently barred cities and other municipalities from improving upon state wage and hour laws. The state also underinvests in wage and hour enforcement. With only six state investigators Ohio has one of the most poorly staffed wage and hour divisions in the nation. Because the legislature has failed to address these gaps, much is left to the federal Department of Labor. Ohio workers have a lot to lose under a Department of Labor focused on advancing the extremist agenda of some corporate employers like Puzder, rather than on worker health, safety and advancement.

Working poor: Too many jobs pay too little.

Largest occupations in Columbus, by employment, wage and wage as share of poverty.

Occupation	Employment	Median annual wage	As share of poverty level
Combined Food Preparation and Serving Workers, Including Fast Food*	31,940	\$18,741	93%
Retail Salespersons*	29,360	\$20,738	103%
Customer Service Representatives	25,950	\$30,014	149%
Laborers and Freight, Stock, and Material Movers, Hand*	23,900	\$23,691	118%
Registered Nurses	23,500	\$61,339	305%
Cashiers*	21,200	\$18,907	94%
Office Clerks, General	18,380	\$30,888	154%
Waiters and Waitresses*	18,030	\$18,907	94%
Janitors and Cleaners, Except Maids and Housekeeping Cleaners*	16,440	\$22,880	114%
Stock Clerks and Order Fillers*	15,150	\$23,296	116%

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupation and Employment Statistics, May 2015, available at <https://www.bls.gov/oes/tables.htm>, accessed February 8, 2017. Detailed occupation by largest number employed. Calculation of median annual income and median annual income as a share of the poverty rate by author. Median annual income based on 2080 hours (full-time, year round). Poverty rate based on 2015 HHS guideline for a family of three, \$20,090. *Seven of the largest occupations pay a median wage that is less than 130 percent of poverty, the gross monthly income threshold for food assistance.