



Work & Wages

10 ways to support Ohio's working people

Hannah Halbert & Caitlin Johnson

Ohio's working people are the state's backbone. They make the products we use every day: cars, washing machines and more. They keep our communities safe. They teach our children and care for our ailing loved ones. They are all of us. Working people deserve peace of mind, free of worry about how to put food on the table, pay for their kids' college or make the rent each month. For too long, policies at the state and federal level have slowly chipped away at that sense of security. As a result, job growth has been weak and a vast gulf has opened between the wealth workers create at their jobs and the amount they take home in their wages. The share of Ohio's working people who rejoined the workforce after the Great Recession trails the nation. Longstanding structural barriers keep African-Americans and women from earning as much as their white male peers, even as men's wages fall. Deep-rooted racism locks many people of color out of job opportunities. The state's wealthiest 1 percent earned more than 19 times the average of the bottom 99 percent of earners combined.

Joining a union gives people a direct say in their working conditions and unions can impact public policy, making the economy fairer for everyone. When higher shares of workers were union members, more people shared in economic growth. Unionized workers in Ohio make \$4.00 an hour more than their non-union counterparts, \$8,000 more a year for full-time work. Union workers are more likely to have pensions and paid sick days, and less likely to be treated unfairly at work or experience harassment or workplace injuries. Union workers pay more in taxes and use the social safety net less than other workers. Black workers and white women earn more when they are in a union. Unions help balance the power of employers and make the economy more fair.

It shouldn't be surprising that employer groups, corporations, and political elites who benefit from rigging the system want to make it more difficult to join a union. Deceptively named Right-to-Work laws have nothing to do with job guarantees or rights at work. Instead these rules aim to reduce unionization and diminish the role unions play in improving policy by stripping the funding unions need to negotiate, implement and enforce collective bargaining agreements. Currently, everyone who benefits from the union contract pays a "fair-share" fee. This amount is calculated to cover just the costs of administering the contract. So-called Right-to-Work laws make this fee optional, so that some workers will benefit from the contract, but not share in the cost of securing it. There are six resolutions pending before the Ohio state legislature that would usher in this and other similar practices.

The courts have been used to curtail workers' power. The *Janus* case is the newest example. In *Janus v. AFSCME*, now before the U.S. Supreme Court, plaintiffs allege that requiring non-members to pay "fair-share" fees violates the First Amendment. But this claim was put to rest 40 years ago when the Court upheld Fair Share. No one is forced to join a union or support its political activities, and the Court rightly ruled to prevent "free-riding" by non-members who

benefit from collective bargaining without sharing in the costs. Arguments in the *Janus* case are set for this month.

State policy can also rig the system against workers. The Ohio legislature has barred local governments from improving working conditions, banned local hire ordinances that help set aside work for local residents, and passed tax cuts that favor the wealthiest Ohioans at the expense of our roads, schools and health care. But there are solutions. We can strengthen Ohio's working people and create an economy that works for everyone by helping workers to speak up together, raising wages, and investing in communities instead of corporations.

Recommendations:

State and federal policy makers can make sure all Ohio's working people – not just the top 1 percent – can enjoy a decent life free from economic insecurity. Although this is by no means a definitive list, this report offers a new path forward with practical policy solutions that can be implemented today.

- 1. Protect working people's right to organize: Oppose so called "right to work" laws both nationally and here in Ohio.**
- 2. Strengthen the public sector: Roll back the massive state tax cuts that benefitted the wealthy. Instead, invest in public programs that expand opportunity such as workforce training, education, affordable childcare and public transportation.**
- 3. Empower local governments to pass their own laws to protect working people in their communities.**
- 4. Fix Ohio's broken unemployment compensation system: Our system can cover more low-wage workers and be solvent, if employers pay their fair share.**
- 5. Protect workers on the job with strong workers' compensation benefits.**
- 6. Restore the minimum wage: Increasing the minimum wage to \$15 by 2025 would give 1.8 million Ohio workers a much deserved and overdue raise.**
- 7. Restore the 40-hour work week: Improvements to scheduling and overtime rules can bring back stability to the work week. Restored overtime protections would cover 351,000 Ohio workers.**
- 8. Paid leave should be the norm, not the exception. Twenty-five years after the Family Medical Leave Act only 13 percent of private sector workers have any paid family leave. There is no federal law requiring paid sick leave. Ohio could enact legislation to provide workers with the opportunity to earn leave.**
- 9. Enforce rules that protect workers from wage theft: Shorting workers on wages is theft and should be enforced as such.**
- 10. Work requirements don't work: Bad jobs keep people in need. Policies to improve job quality and training can help families prosper. Work requirements in public benefit programs like food assistance and Medicaid keep people poor and sick.**