

# State and Local Policymakers Can Raise Standards and Build Power for Workers

By Karla Walter and David Madland December 10, 2025

State and local policymakers can help make work pay for ordinary Americans by building power and raising standards for working people, supporting unions in their communities, and expanding workforce stability. This report details 21 ways for state and local policymakers to improve the lives of working people and help achieve a number of goals, including:

- Supporting collective action for private sector workers in the workplace, at the bargaining table, and on the picket line.
- Creating opportunities for workers to bargain more broadly across entire industry sectors.
- Strengthening and defending good jobs and union rights for government workers.
- Upholding consistent market standards on government-supported work.
- Preparing for the future with union trigger laws, artificial intelligence (AI) protections, and heat standards while expanding opportunity for the next generation of workers.
- Advocating for workers with the bully pulpit and across the government and using strong enforcement to make worker protections and benefits real.
- Banning practices that undermine worker power and supporting local innovation to improve workers' lives.

Action on these policies is more important than ever after the Trump administration has taken numerous actions to upend bargaining rights and erode basic worker protections.<sup>1</sup> Yet even before the current administration, the federal government did not provide sufficient protections to ensure that working people earn fair pay and decent benefits and that their labor rights are respected.

Enacting reforms to build worker power and voice will be essential to ensuring Americans are able to access other key progressive workplace priorities, such as paid sick and family and medical leave, since these benefits are often guaranteed by collective bargaining agreements. Indeed, unions help advocate for policies to expand access to these benefits and ensure that the most vulnerable workers are able to assert their rights.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, not every city or state will have the pro-worker majority required to adopt all these reforms. However, some strategies enjoy a tradition of bipartisan support—such as ensuring government spending creates good jobs—or can be implemented by a single pro-worker lawmaker, such as using the bully pulpit to support worker organizing.<sup>3</sup>

A brief description of each policy, as well as state and local laws that can serve as models, follows.

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## **1. Protect striking workers**

Labor negotiations are fair and efficient when workers and employers both have power at the bargaining table and incentives to compromise. Yet often, companies hold far more power since workers rely on steady employment to support themselves and their families. Workers may withhold their labor by going on strike but take on significant financial risks. To empower workers to exercise their rights, states such as Washington, Oregon, New York, and New Jersey have extended eligibility for unemployment insurance benefits to striking workers, and Illinois protects picketing workers from any interference or intimidation as well as legal liability for unintentional property damage.<sup>4</sup>

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## **2. Bring workers and employers together in industry standards boards**

Industry standards boards bring together workers, businesses, and government representatives to set minimum workplace standards for an entire economic sector, such as fast food, nursing homes, home care, or agriculture.<sup>5</sup> The boards create a forum for workers and employers to discuss a range of issues—including wages, benefits, training, and leave—and are particularly important in industries where union membership is low, heavily outsourced, or structured in a way that makes unionization difficult. Six states and three local governments have enacted this type of policy, and other policymakers are debating legislation to create standards boards in several other states.<sup>6</sup>

See also:

[“Industry Standards Boards Are Delivering Results for Workers, Employers, and Their Communities”](#)

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## **3. Strengthen public sector unions and bargaining rights**

State laws govern whether state and local public employees can unionize, yet many progressive states do not extend these protections to all eligible workers or go far enough to ensure these workers can exercise their rights.<sup>7</sup> In recent years, state lawmakers have extended bargaining protections to student employees, publicly supported home care and child care workers, and employees of state and local lawmakers.<sup>8</sup> States should also modernize union dues deduction and communication

between unionized workers; support strong binding impasse resolution and strike rights; make AI and new technology a mandatory subject of bargaining; and work collaboratively with unions on trainings, including new-hire union orientations, benefits navigation, and job advancement skills.<sup>9</sup> Oregon recently enacted a law barring third parties from impersonating union representatives, thereby preventing antiworker groups from misrepresenting themselves while encouraging workers to opt out of membership.<sup>10</sup> Finally, Colorado and Virginia have both recently enacted laws allowing some government employees to unionize but could go much further to ensure all public sector workers who want to bargain are free to do so.<sup>11</sup>

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## 4. Prepare for the future with union trigger laws

Cases before conservative courts threaten to undermine the primary federal law guaranteeing the union rights of private sector workers, while the Trump administration goes further than any previous administration to stop enforcing the law.<sup>12</sup> Without these protections, private sector workers who want to form a union would have no legally enforced path to do so. New York and California are leading the fight to uphold workers' rights by enacting union trigger laws that would regulate private sector bargaining at the state level if the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) is struck down or ceases to be enforced, and legislators in Massachusetts are also debating a union trigger bill.<sup>13</sup> Far more states should advance these laws, but they should also go further to include provisions to ensure that all private sector workers can organize, strengthen worksite-level bargaining and scale up union representation in new industries through sectoral bargaining strategies, and leverage government spending to make labor protections real.<sup>14</sup>

See also:

[“Union Trigger Laws 101: How States Can Protect Workers if Federal Labor Law Falls”](#)

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## 5. Use the bully pulpit to support organizing workers

Pro-worker policymakers can use official speeches, high-level convenings, committee hearings and investigations, and private conversations to advocate for unions and workers. Similarly, state and local politicians can provide a strong counterweight to the Trump administration's attacks on workers' rights.<sup>15</sup> During the UAW's 2023 strike, Gov. Andy Beshear (D-KY) joined workers on the picket line and described himself as “the proud, pro-union governor of the Commonwealth of Kentucky.” At another event, he argued that, “Our UAW families are fighting for better wages and better health care benefits—something we should want for every single one of our citizens.”<sup>16</sup> And after auto manufacturer Stellantis stalled plans to reopen its unionized plant in Belvidere, Illinois, Gov. JB Pritzker (D-IL) joined with workers in successfully advocating for the company to keep its commitments.<sup>17</sup>

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## 6. Ban captive audience meetings

Companies often force workers to attend meetings, or even one-on-one conversations with their direct supervisors, where they must listen to a corporation's religious or political views, including their opposition to unions. Thirteen states—Alaska, Connecticut, California, Hawaii, Illinois, Maine, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington—banned this practice.<sup>18</sup> While the laws maintain an employer's ability to speak freely about these issues, companies are prohibited from forcing workers to attend meetings on topics unrelated to their work, including voicing support for or opposition to political candidates; promoting religious practices; or discussing membership in a civic, community, or labor organization.

See also:

[“Governors Should Fight for An Economic Agenda to Improve the Lives of Working-Class Residents”](#)

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## 7. Require that government spending create good jobs

State and local governments spend hundreds of billions of dollars every year in the private sector for the purchase of goods and services and the construction of public infrastructure.<sup>19</sup> Yet the jobs created through government spending too often pay very low wages and have poor working conditions.<sup>20</sup> Cities and states should carefully evaluate decisions to contract out and adopt market wage and benefits standards for contracted work as well as incentives to raise workplace standards above the legal floor.<sup>21</sup> These laws should extend standards to all forms of government spending, including contracting, grants, and tax credits, as well as to service work supported by the government. For example, New Jersey has adopted wage standards for a range of projects receiving public support; enacted a prevailing wage for building-service workers, including janitors and security guards; and adopted the Healthy Terminals Act to ensure that airport service workers earn decent wages and benefits.<sup>22</sup>

See also:

[“Government on Workers’ Side: How State and Local Policymakers and Advocates Can Raise Standards for Publicly Supported Work”](#)

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## 8. Use project labor agreements, labor peace agreements, and apprenticeship goals to support high-quality public infrastructure and services

Increasingly, cities and states are adopting policies to ensure the uninterrupted availability of a well-qualified workforce. For example, policymakers can help prevent work on large projects from being interrupted by work stoppages or employee lockouts by requiring project labor agreements and labor peace agreements on at-risk projects.<sup>23</sup> Also, New York adopted legislation to require apprenticeships on renewable energy projects starting in 2025, while Illinois, Washington state, and several large cities have adopted apprenticeship participation goals on government-funded work.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, dozens of cities and counties have contractor responsible bidder standards that include review of a bidder's workforce record, such as participation in an active registered apprenticeship program and prior workplace violations.<sup>25</sup>

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## 9. Defend good public sector jobs

Job quality standards for government workers help raise wages, reduce racial wealth gaps, and create a more effective and efficient government.<sup>26</sup> Yet in the face of significant reductions in federal spending, slowing economic growth, and federal attacks on government worker protections, many state and local policymakers may look to cut standards for government workers.<sup>27</sup> Policymakers must fight to maintain and strengthen standards for public sector workers.<sup>28</sup> In 2025, New York enacted legislation clarifying that the government must comply with occupational protections included in collective bargaining agreements during times of staffing reductions.<sup>29</sup> Additionally, Illinois enacted a law upholding civil service protections and preventing outsourcing of state and local public sector jobs funded by federal matching programs—such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), unemployment insurance, and Medicaid.<sup>30</sup>

See also:

[“Good Jobs for Government Workers Improve Public Services”](#)

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## 10. Allow rideshare drivers and other federally excluded workers to bargain together

California and Massachusetts are the first states to create processes for drivers at companies such as Uber and Lyft to unionize and bargain over pay and benefits for the entire sector, creating important tests for whether this type of collective bargaining policy can build power and improve conditions.<sup>31</sup> Unless and until the Trump administration and the U.S. Supreme Court take actions to affirm that drivers are employees rather than independent contractors, which is unlikely, states will have the legal authority to create labor policy for these workers unconstrained by the federal preemption of most state actions that affect unions and collective bargaining.<sup>32</sup> If rideshare workers in just these two states were to organize, agreements would cover more than 900,000 workers, effectively reversing the past 20 years of union coverage decline in the United States.<sup>33</sup> Drivers in Minnesota and Illinois are pushing for similar state policies.<sup>34</sup> States can also take action to expand bargaining rights for other private sector workers excluded from federal protections—such as agricultural workers—as California and New York have done.<sup>35</sup>

See also:

[“State Rideshare Collective Bargaining Policies Hold Great Promise”](#)

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## 11. Support productive negotiations

In March 2025, the Trump administration fired all but four mediators at the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service (FMCS), an independent agency that helps resolve negotiation disputes without work disruptions by mediating thousands of collective bargaining cases annually.<sup>36</sup> While nearly half of FMCS employees later returned to work after a federal court order to rehire the workers, the Trump administration’s proposed fiscal year 2026 budget includes plans to

shutter the agency.<sup>37</sup> In order to fill the gap in services, policymakers in Michigan, California, and Washington are taking steps to expand state mediation services.<sup>38</sup> Others should do the same and consider pooling resources to support this work.

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## **12. Expand opportunity for the next generation of workers**

Collaborative partnerships, led jointly by unions and employers, can support high-quality training, boost training completion rates, increase participation among workers of color, and raise graduate earnings.<sup>39</sup> State and local policymakers can expand union involvement in training by increasing the number of worker representatives on state and local workforce boards; adopting labor management training partnerships to attract workers to public jobs; funding joint initiatives in the private sector; and promoting registered apprenticeships on publicly supported work. For example, Washington state’s workforce board operates under a tripartite model, bringing together business, labor, and government.<sup>40</sup> California has established a \$10 million High Road Training Partnerships initiative to support “industry-based, worker-focused training partnerships.”<sup>41</sup> And New York partners with the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees’ (AFSCME) District Council 37 to deliver environmental literacy and technical training to green the state’s building stock.<sup>42</sup>

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## **13. Repeal right-to-work laws**

Right-to-work laws undermine workers’ essential right to organize and sustain strong unions.<sup>43</sup> Policymakers should reject these laws that stack the deck in favor of corporations and make all workers poorer by allowing some workers to “free ride,” or benefit from a union contract without being required to pay the costs of negotiating or administering it. In March 2023, Michigan repealed its right-to-work law.<sup>44</sup>

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## **14. Ban harmful uses of AI and give workers a voice in its development**

Recent technology advancements have the potential to benefit workers, but only if workers have a say over its use; unions and workers are centered in the development of new technology as well as training systems that support transition to new jobs; and policymakers enact guardrails and transparency to prevent harmful uses.<sup>45</sup> For example, Illinois, California, Colorado, and New Jersey have advanced reforms to prevent the use of AI decision-making that discriminates or has adverse outcomes for any group.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, New York mandates that state agencies disclose the use of automated decision-making systems,<sup>47</sup> and four states have passed laws to protect

warehouse workers from unsafe working conditions due to AI.<sup>48</sup> Massachusetts is also debating ambitious legislation that would restrict worker surveillance, ban employers from relying solely on automated decision-making in employment-related decisions, and allow workers to refuse to follow AI directives if doing so would result in harms.<sup>49</sup> And Gov. Josh Shapiro (D-PA) signed an executive order and established guidelines for state employees in the adoption of generative AI—such as requiring that public employees retain oversight and control of AI tools and preventing AI from being classified as an employee or being used as a substitute for human oversight. Gov. Shapiro also launched a pilot program that partnered with public employee unions to achieve meaningful efficiency gains for participating workers.<sup>50</sup> Finally, state and local policymakers should publicly oppose efforts to federally preempt state actions that protect communities from the harms of AI.<sup>51</sup>

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## **15. Make worker protections and benefits real with strong enforcement**

Too often, weak enforcement of employment laws results in workers fending for themselves when companies steal wages and benefits, thereby increasing reliance on public assistance and even depressing market wages.<sup>52</sup> To prevent workplace violations, California, Los Angeles, Seattle, and Oregon’s Multnomah County partner with worker organizations to educate workers on their rights and encourage them to report bad actors, and several states grant workers the right to bring lawsuits to recover unpaid wages and hold employers accountable.<sup>53</sup> New York City passed a “just cause” law for fast-food workers that prevents workers from being disciplined or terminated unless they fail to “satisfactorily perform job duties or [they] engag[e] in misconduct.”<sup>54</sup> Finally, Maine funds unions and worker centers to help unemployed workers access benefits and new jobs.<sup>55</sup>

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## **16. Take an all-of-government approach to supporting worker organizing and protections**

Policymakers should be as expansive as possible in their approach to supporting unions and workplace protections. In 2025, Democrat Sara Innamorato, the county executive of Allegheny County, Pennsylvania, signed an order to expand worker protections and strengthen bargaining rights for workers in her community. Specifically, the order requires the county manager to create a new office of worker protections, expand reporting of workplace enforcement data, and prepare for a repeal of any of the provisions of federal private sector bargaining protections, as well as explore models to expand bargaining rights for workers not covered by the NLRA and allow workers to engage in sectoral standard setting.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, Illinois enacted legislation directing the state labor department to replace any minimum wage or occupational safety standards if they are repealed at the federal level.<sup>57</sup> Previously, former President

Joe Biden’s White House Task Force on Worker Organizing and Empowerment issued more than 70 recommendations, including reducing barriers to organizing, protecting organizing workers from illegal retaliation, and establishing more public resources on unions and collective bargaining.<sup>58</sup> In addition, policymakers can use government websites, constituent interactions, and complementary state events—such as wage theft clinics and job fairs—to educate workers on their labor rights.<sup>59</sup>

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## **17. Let outsourced workers keep their jobs**

Increasingly, large companies are driving down costs by shedding their role as employer through a variety of means, including relying on staffing agencies, franchises, and independent contractors.<sup>60</sup> Yet every time a contract is rebid, experienced and well-qualified workers risk losing work. To improve employment stability for maintenance, airport, and food preparation workers hired by labor subcontractors, New Jersey enacted the Service Worker Retention Law in 2023 to require that these workers be offered continued employment when contracts change hands.<sup>61</sup> Several cities have also enacted retention standards for specific service occupations.<sup>62</sup>

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## **18. Allow union members to deduct dues directly from taxes**

While large corporations can deduct or fully write off many of the costs associated with doing business, workers lost the ability to deduct their union dues—a cost of negotiating their incomes—following the enactment of the Trump administration’s 2017 Tax Cuts and Jobs Act.<sup>63</sup> Previously, federal law allowed the deduction, and many states had laws that recognized the federal deduction. Maryland, New York, Delaware, and Pennsylvania restored the deduction for union dues, and California created a tax credit for union dues.<sup>64</sup>

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## **19. Protect workers from extreme heat**

Working in extreme heat conditions increases workers’ risk of heat-related injuries and illnesses, including exhaustion, heat stroke, burns, and falls. Moreover, it can exacerbate conditions such as asthma, kidney disease, and heart disease and even lead to premature death.<sup>65</sup> Seven states—including California, Maryland, Oregon, and Washington—have enacted protections to shield workers from extreme heat, and several more are debating heat standards.<sup>66</sup> These laws should protect workers in both indoor and outdoor work environments and include temperature triggers and monitoring, acclimatization protocols, methods to block heat exposures, hydration access, mandatory paid rest breaks, emergency response procedures, employer reporting requirements, and antiretaliation provisions to ensure workers know their rights and feel empowered to report violations.

See also:

[“States Must Lead the Way To Protect Workers From Extreme Heat”](#)

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## **20. Ban noncompete agreements for all workers**

Many employers require workers to sign restrictive contractual agreements such as noncompete contracts that prevent individual workers from moving to better jobs.<sup>67</sup> Currently, four states ban noncompete agreements by preventing either their use or their enforcement, and several others include minimum income limits.<sup>68</sup> For example, Minnesota prevents employers from creating noncompete agreements as of July 1, 2023, regardless of a worker's income or status as an employee or independent contractor.<sup>69</sup>

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## **21. Empower cities to enact pro-worker standards that reflect the needs of their local economies**

According to the Economic Policy Institute, 44 states have laws that bar cities and other local government bodies from enacting standards to improve work in their localities.<sup>70</sup> These laws ban local governments from taking action on specific employment standards, including minimum wage and prevailing wage standards, project labor agreements, gig worker protections, and heat standards.<sup>71</sup> Pro-worker state officials should overturn these preemptions and empower local governments to pass stronger labor standards.

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## **Conclusion**

State and local lawmakers have significant power to improve the lives of working people, despite the federal government rolling back policies and programs that help support everyday Americans' earnings, union rights, and economic stability. Now more than ever, it is important for cities and states to take action to support workers' right to organize into unions and negotiate across industry sectors, uphold consistent standards on government-supported work, and ensure that strong workplace standards are enforced.

## Endnotes

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