

Virginia Workers' Biggest Win in Decades Could Come in 2026

By Karla Walter January 12, 2026

Virginia may be on the cusp of empowering its approximately 574,000 state and local government workers to unionize and bargain collectively over wages, benefits, and working conditions.¹ While outgoing Gov. Glenn Youngkin (R) vetoed a measure to do so in the last legislative session, strengthening public sector bargaining rights remains a priority of the Virginia General Assembly.² As a result, Governor-elect Abigail Spanberger (D) will likely hold the keys to enacting full bargaining rights in the public sector and, in this way, can help make work pay for Virginia families; allow state and local governments to attract and retain well-qualified workers; and support the values of everyday Americans, who are increasingly in favor of unions.

Virginia's prospects for full public sector bargaining

Virginia lawmakers are increasingly embracing the expansion of public sector bargaining to rebuild prosperity for working families in the state. Had it not been vetoed by Gov. Youngkin, last session's H.B. 2764 would have recognized the union rights of state government employees for the first time in nearly 80 years; eliminated onerous requirements that chill local government worker organizing; and established a governing board and common set of procedures for unionization and bargaining.³

This follows on the General Assembly's 2020 law loosening a decades-old collective bargaining ban for local government workers. Since then, at least 17 communities extended bargaining to these workers.⁴ Yet this represents a small fraction of local governing bodies in Virginia, and the law's protections are available only to workers in jurisdictions governed by pro-worker majorities that first pass enabling legislation.⁵

Moreover, repealing the ban on state employee bargaining is an important step in overcoming the state's Jim Crow past. In 1946, the General Assembly passed the ban—which prohibits state agencies from recognizing public employee unions—

after Black attendants, orderlies, maids, and janitors at the University of Virginia hospital organized a union and successfully bargained for higher wages and benefits and improved hours.⁶

Although Spanberger has declined to comment on whether she would support the public sector reforms—and although she opposes a full repeal of Virginia’s private sector right-to-work law—she may take a different stance than her predecessor.⁷ On the campaign trail, Spanberger committed to “[making] sure more Virginians can negotiate for the benefits and fair treatment that they’ve earned” and was a vocal opponent of President Donald Trump’s executive order to strip collective bargaining rights from 1 million federal workers.⁸

Public sector bargaining benefits workers and the public

Studies find that collective bargaining rights for government workers help raise wages, reduce racial and gender wage and wealth gaps, and shrink the earnings gap between public and private sector workers.⁹ Research from the Economic Policy Institute finds that while public sector workers earn less than comparable private sector workers, the earnings gap is 8 percentage points smaller in states with strong collective bargaining rights than in states with no bargaining protections.¹⁰ The impact is even larger for workers without college degrees.¹¹

Stronger public sector unions would also help Virginia’s public employers attract the next generation of public servants and retain experienced, well-qualified workers. According to analysis from the Virginia Department of Human Resource Management, more than 1 in 5 positions with the state government were vacant in 2024.¹²

Academic studies have demonstrated that employees who are unionized—including government employees—are significantly less likely to quit their jobs.¹³ For example, an academic paper comparing turnover of public K-12 teachers in school districts with stronger unions to teachers in districts with weaker unions found that districts with stronger unions had a lower turnover rate of qualified teachers but higher dismissal rates of nontenured teachers for weak performance.¹⁴

Finally, by attracting and retaining well-qualified workers, public sector bargaining supports the provision of high-quality, reliable public goods and services. For example, by recognizing the right of Medicaid-funded home care workers to bargain and setting higher standards for these workers, states have improved outcomes for Medicaid recipients.¹⁵ And public sector unions frequently use the bargaining process to win reforms that benefit the broader public, including smaller public school class sizes and investments in public transit infrastructure.¹⁶

Conversely, low standards for government workers hide the actual cost of running the government because workers paid poverty wages are more likely to rely on publicly funded safety net programs. A 2010 study of school cafeteria workers in California found that they used an average of \$1,743 per year in public assistance due to low wages.¹⁷

Public support for unions is high

Policies to support unions are increasingly in line with the economic values of Americans. For several years, public support for unions has climbed to levels not seen since the 1960s.¹⁸ Recent Center for American Progress analysis found that unions are popular with nearly every age group regardless of partisan affiliation or education—and younger generations support unions the most.¹⁹

Moreover, exit polls indicate that Virginians are increasingly aware of the importance of government work as an engine of economic opportunity in the state and are particularly focused on economic policies to raise standards for working families. Virginia—with more than 320,000 residents employed by the federal government²⁰—was particularly affected by Trump’s rescission of federal employee bargaining rights, and in exit polls conducted during the last election, 60 percent of Virginia voters said that they were affected by the so-called Department of Government Efficiency’s job cuts.²¹ Moreover, nearly half said the economy was their top issue in the election, and 85 percent said their family finances were “holding steady” or “falling behind,” compared with only 12 percent who said their family was “getting ahead.”²²

Conclusion

Governor-elect Spanberger and the Virginia General Assembly can improve the lives of hundreds of thousands of working Virginians by empowering state and local government employees to join together in unions. Doing so would not only help these workers and their families but also allow state and local governments to attract and retain well-qualified workers and reflect the values of an America that is increasingly supportive of unions.

Endnotes

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