

Organizing and Growth

The economy of recent years has been brutal to America's workers. Between 1973 and 2010, productivity nearly doubled, while wages stagnated—real hourly wages for production/nonsupervisory workers actually dropped by 6.7 percent.

As a proportion of U.S. national income, corporate profits are at record post-WWII levels and workers' wages stand at record post-war lows.

Inequality in both wealth and income is greater than at any time since the early part of the last century.

The events of the Great Recession tell this 21st century story of inequality starkly and dramatically. In the almost two years after the official end of the recession in June 2009, corporate profits grew by a whopping 41 percent, but real wages continued their downward slide.

Inequality has real-life consequences. The economic burdens placed on working families are virtually unbearable. Longer hours, fewer benefits and less security are just part of the story.

Collective bargaining has always been the most effective antidote to inequality and injustice. But over the last several decades, the right to bargain collectively also has been under increasing political attack. Employer opposition to worker organizing efforts, rampant in the private sector, has increased significantly in the public sector. In the past year, these attacks have escalated at the federal, state and local levels.

At the same time, over the past year workers have shown they are prepared to stand up. Through statehouse demonstrations in Madison, Wis., ballot initiatives in Ohio and the movement of the 99%, workers are standing up for themselves, for their families and for their communities.

In America's workplaces, workers are standing up in the face of enormous opposition. Transportation Security Officers, airline employees, public service workers, college professors, nurses, warehouse workers, cable television installers, carwash workers, independent providers and television writers, among others, have answered the call to join together to form their own unions.

Workers outside of traditional workplaces and without the benefit of collective bargaining laws also are standing up: domestic workers, day laborers, taxi drivers, guestworkers and freelance artists are self-organizing and seeking to fashion creative new models of exercising collective power.

And workers who already have the benefit of union contracts are standing up to defend their wages, benefits and working conditions.

Through the strength of their collective voices, unionized workers have improved their work environments and have increased productivity and efficiency, thereby promoting job growth.

Workers know that only by joining together and standing up for themselves will we be able to create lives that fulfill the promise of America.

When workers are prepared to stand up, they need to know they are not alone. Together, we are all part of the labor movement. This is what defines us. This is who we are—workers progressing together. The AFL-CIO exists to be the vehicle for worker mobilization and organization.

Nothing is more central to our work than mobilizing and organizing on the side of workers seeking to form unions and build power by engaging in collective bargaining. We must trumpet this call as part of our legislative and policy agendas at federal and state legislative bodies. We must work to expand collective bargaining rights and reform labor laws to ensure that all workers who want to form unions and bargain collectively have a fair opportunity to do so.

At the same time, as we execute our ambitious legislative and policy agendas, we cannot overlook the overarching imperative of standing with workers seeking to join our movement now. We must re-dedicate and recommit ourselves to supporting workers' campaigns, because we cannot wait for politicians to fulfill promises or for favorable legislation to be enacted. Standing still and waiting are not acceptable.

The obstacles workers face in trying to form unions are intolerable. We must tear down those obstacles by showing the same courage, determination and dedication that workers themselves demonstrate. This requires courage, focus, discipline and resources.

As a key part of the fabric of our mission, we all share responsibility for achieving success:

- Our program must consist of both statutory reform and active support for worker organizing efforts.
- Each of the federation's departments has a role to play.
- We need vibrant local labor movements. Support for worker organizing and collective bargaining campaigns is central to the work of our state federations and central labor councils. Affiliate unions should call upon them for assistance and work in partnership with them on campaigns.
- Our affiliated unions are united in their commitment both to their own success and to the success of each other.

The AFL-CIO reaffirms its commitment to supporting the efforts of workers to organize and to bargain collectively.