

How States Can Lead the Way for Workers: A State Playbook

RACHEL WEST AND JULIE SU, NOVEMBER 2025

Workers across the country are feeling strained and under attack: paychecks aren't enough to pay the rent, life-saving safety protections are being stripped away, and job security is a luxury enjoyed by too few. In this moment, state and local leaders have an unparalleled opportunity to lead the charge on policies to expand workers' rights and help workers build power—and many are already doing so.

The Century Foundation's *How States Can Lead the Way for Workers: A State Playbook* details “next generation” pro-worker policies—bold but concrete ideas that will benefit workers, families, and state economies—alongside specific case studies. It offers a menu of options for workers, advocates, and policymakers to consider across five areas:



PUTTING MORE MONEY IN WORKERS' POCKETS

Create wage boards for vulnerable workers in specific industries: Bring together representatives of workers, employers, and government to set industry-wide labor standards that boost pay, job quality, and worker voice for low- and middle-earning workers.

Phase out discriminatory subminimum wages: End the 14(c) subminimum wage that enables employers to pay workers with disabilities as little as pennies per hour, as well as subminimum wages for tipped and youth workers.

Strengthen enforcement: Enact mandatory treble damages to strongly penalize employers that violate workers' rights, deter future violations, and compensate workers for harm; and enact wage liens that reduce unpaid wage judgments and avoid lengthy litigation by placing a hold on the employer's assets until they pay the wages they owe.

Make progress toward equal pay: Ensure equal pay for comparable work for all protected classes of workers, paired with a salary history ban, pay transparency, wage disclosure protections, and robust data collection.



CREATING GOOD JOBS FOR ALL

Expand high-road training partnerships: Fund high-quality sectoral partnership training—with earn-and-learn opportunities, supportive services, and worker voice—that leads directly to good jobs and sustained earnings gains, including for disadvantaged workers.

Leverage public dollars to create good jobs for public contractors: Attach strong standards for job quality, training, and equitable recruiting to publicly funded projects using tools such as community benefits agreements, workforce equity agreements, and project labor agreements.

Boost supportive services: Invest in and connect workers to services such as child care and transportation that enable them to train for, transition to, and stay in good jobs.



ENHANCING RESPONSIBILITY FOR WORKERS' WELL-BEING

Strengthen hot goods protections: Enact laws and penalties that prevent shipment and sale of goods made in violation of minimum wage, overtime, and child labor requirements.

Hold corporate power in check: Hold accountable *all* of the employers that influence the terms and conditions of workers' employment by strengthening joint employment liability, and prevent predatory corporations from confiscating workers' paychecks for medical debt.

Tax the rich and profitable corporations to better serve workers: Create a dedicated state tax on high-income residents or wealthy corporations to fund pro-worker policies.



SUPPORTING HEALTHIER WORKERS AND CARE

Combat harmful child labor: Strengthen laws and civil and criminal penalties, including for dangerous industries and occupations, to prevent, deter, and penalize child labor.

Modernize health and safety protections to shield workers from new risks: Update state OSHA plans and laws to tackle growing threats such as extreme heat and AI-driven production quotas.

Enhance job quality for care workers through minimum staffing standards: Improve staff-to-resident ratios at nursing homes to protect health and safety for workers and residents.

Ensure schedules are fair and predictable: Enact fair workweek laws that include giving workers rights to "predictability pay," to rest between shifts, to request flexibility, and to receive advance notice of their schedule.



BUILDING WORKER POWER OVER CORPORATE POWER

Ensure all workers have a voice on the job: Expand collective bargaining rights for groups excluded from federal labor law, such as farmworkers, public-sector workers, and workers whose wages are paid by public programs such as Medicaid and child care subsidies..

Build a firmer foundation for labor rights: Empower state labor relations boards to enforce workers' rights if the National Labor Relations Board fails or is unable to do so.

Establish "just cause" protections against unfair firings: Require employers to show good reason, such as poor performance, misconduct, downsizing, or reorganization, when dismissing a worker.

Free workers from harmful noncompete agreements: Ban new noncompetes and render void existing agreements and those entered into out-of-state.

Give workers a voice in workplace AI: Counteract intensive AI-enabled surveillance, monitoring, and management; and give state employees input into AI adoption and use in the workplace.



To read the full playbook, scan the QR code or visit:
tcf.org/content/report/state-playbook-how-states-can-lead-the-way-for-workers/