

UNIONS WIN IT: Low-Wage Worker Benefits

BACKGROUND

Millions of people depend on the jobs performed by hourly/low-wage workers. It is a group comprised mainly of women, the young, and minorities, in fields such as retail sales, food processing, hospitals, hotels, and call centers. In order to take care of themselves and their families, these workers deserve the same family-friendly rights and benefits as other workers, including job and income security, flexibility, and adequate benefit coverage.

Studies show that the ability to unionize and bargain collectively helps improve the quality of low-wage jobs and the workers are more likely to have benefits associated with good jobs such as better pay and access to health insurance, pension and family-friendly workplace policies.

FEDERAL AND STATE LAWS

Low-wage workers are particularly susceptible to becoming victims of employment and labor law violations. The following laws are just several that provide guidelines:

- Federal and state minimum wage standards.
- Labor laws such as the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA); and the National Labor Relations Act.
- Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) and state laws that expand the FMLA or provide family leave insurance (i.e., in California and New Jersey).
- State laws such as California's Family School Partnership Act, which allows parents, grandparents, and guardians to take unpaid time off from work to participate in their children's school or child care activities.

Several states have passed their own Wage Theft Prevention laws as well as laws that provide flexibility in a worker's hours or schedule. [So make sure to check your state laws before bargaining.](#)

COLLECTIVE BARGAINING

Because hourly/low-wage workers often earn minimum wage with minimal benefits — while having the same family responsibilities as other employees — it is important to bargain for the greatest degree of inclusion. Federal and state laws are set the floor to bargain for broader work family contract language. Using current laws as a framework, unions can negotiate additional protections in the collective bargaining agreement by clarifying terms and making definitions more encompassing.

Here are several areas where unions can bargain to strengthen and enhance work life benefits for hourly/low-wage workers:

Stable schedules

Bargain for a minimum number of hours worked, as well as advance notice of schedules; elimination of mandatory overtime and notice of overtime; and the right to take a voluntary reduction in time.

Paid leave/time off

Bargain for paid sick days that can be used for oneself or a family member. Bargain for the flexibility to use vacation, floating

holiday hours, or comp time as needed. Bargain for specific time off such as several hours a year to attend a child's parent-teacher conferences.

Childcare

Negotiate for the employer to subsidize the cost of childcare through a fund or by an agreement with childcare facilities to provide services at a reduced rate, including before/after school care. Negotiate language that provides vouchers for using at the workers' own childcare provider.

Funds

Bargain for employer paid dependent care funds to offset both child- and elder-care costs. Employers can also set up a tax deferred plan so that dependent care expenses are non-taxable [This is an IRS program and there is no cost to employer except administration]. Unions can also bargain for a policy to establish a fund to cover bereavement leave including transportation to country of origin for immigrant workers.

Family leave

Give workers the ability to take unpaid "approved" leave without restrictions and

without repercussions, as needed for one's own or a family member's serious health condition. Bargain for broader job protection than provided by the Family and Medical Leave Act, such as including the whole bargaining unit regardless of time on the job or number of hours worked.

Life skills education

Bargain for funding to establish labor management programs that help build parents' skills such as reading report cards, communicating with teachers, creating a positive learning environment at home, as well as how to apply for and fund college education. Workers with long hours and inconvenient shifts often have a hard time participating in their children's schooling.

See our other fact sheets on [Family Leave](#), [Flexibility](#), [Child Care and Paid Sick Time](#).

A wide range of actual contract language is available for free in the Labor Project's [LEARN WorkFamily database](#). www.learnworkfamily.org

Get more information and download free resources: www.working-families.org

GET INVOLVED

Labor's involvement is crucial to building the 21st century family-friendly workplace. While progress has been made, much needs to be done so workers can take time to care for themselves and their families without losing their jobs, wages, or benefits.

Unions have been engaged in efforts to uphold the rights of low-wage workers who are particularly vulnerable to wage theft, wage stagnation, and lack of benefits such as family leave, paid sick days, health insurance and pension. In addition to bargaining for stronger contract language, it is equally important for unions to participate in efforts to advance family-friendly workplace policies at the local, state and national level.

Join the Labor Project's efforts to advance family-friendly workplace policies.

[California Work & Family Coalition](#): Learn about and join our California-specific campaigns on issues such as family leave, caregiver discrimination, and paid sick days. www.workfamilyCA.org

[Family Values @ Work](#): Learn about and join efforts in states with labor-community coalitions working for paid sick days, family leave insurance and other policies that value families at work. www.familyvaluesatwork.org