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
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

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