Best States to Work Index 2023: Policy Recommendations

Stricter policies on wages, worker protections, and rights to organize are essential to support workers and their families. Because women (particularly women of color) are overrepresented in low-wage jobs that lack essential workplace protections (such as paid leave), stronger mandates can reduce racial, gender, and economic inequities. Better labor policies correlate not only to higher median household income and GDP per capita, but also to lower rates of poverty, infant mortality, and food insecurity.

No policy tracked in the Best States to Work Index (BSWI) has an adequate federal mandate, so all offer opportunities for federal and state governments to strengthen policies on wages, worker protections, and rights to organize. No state has a perfect score on the index; even states scoring well have room for improvement.

Wage Policies

Oxfam calls on state and federal policymakers to RAISE THE WAGE. At both the state and federal levels, subminimum tipped wages should be abolished, minimum wage exclusions of certain workers must end, and the minimum wage needs to be lifted.

- At the federal level, one piece of legislation would implement all these policies: the Raise the Wage Act. It would raise the federal minimum wage from $7.25 to $17 by 2028; gradually eliminate subminimum wages for tipped workers, disabled workers, and youth; and begin automatic, indexed wage increases in 2029.
- While Congress drags its feet, the majority of states have raised their minimum wages. And some states have passed legislation to index automatic minimum wage increases to inflation; all states should adopt this policy.
- The District of Columbia’s minimum wage, while still inadequate to support a family, is a good model for states to consider, as it 1) has the highest ratio of wage to cost of living; and 2) ties automatic annual wage increases to the level of inflation. States should also allow localities to set a higher wage than the state standard.
- Given the extreme cost of care for children, the elderly, and people with disabilities in the U.S., and the burden these costs place on already insufficient wages, there is a serious need for federal investment in the care economy. The Child Care for Working Families Act and the Child Care for Every Community Act would help make child care more accessible and affordable, while increasing pay for child care workers and early educators. The Better Care Better Jobs Act and the Home and Community Based Services Access Act would expand care services for the elderly and people with disabilities.

Worker Protection Policies

There is a great need for stronger worker protections at the state and federal levels, including paid family and medical leave, stronger equal pay laws, and protections for domestic workers. Fortunately, there are bills available for the federal government to adopt and improve the worker protection landscape for all workers. And some states are moving to strengthen worker protections on their own.

PAID LEAVE: Congress should mandate paid sick and family leave for all workers. There are several bills Congress can pass to establish federal paid leave standards, including:

- The FAMILY Act, which provides up to 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave for reasons ranging from medical issues to childbirth, or to support care responsibilities.
- The Healthy Families Act, which guarantees up to seven paid sick days a year for short-term illness, preventive care, caring for a sick family member, or seeking assistance related to domestic violence, sexual assault, or stalking.
Fighting inequality to build a better world

Oxfam believes that poverty is a policy choice, and that the ultrawealthy and giant corporations have hijacked our systems to benefit a select few. We are working to redress the balance of power, putting it back in the hands of working families in the U.S. and around the world.

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The future is equal
issue brief from Oxfam America

• States have made major progress in filling the gap by creating their own paid sick and family leave programs. Minnesota’s recently passed paid leave policy is comprehensive, providing up to 20 weeks of paid leave for private, public, and part-time employees, and extending “safe leave” coverage for survivors of sexual or domestic violence. Further, the policy’s definition of family is expansive, recognizing that workers may routinely care for people to whom they aren’t legally or biologically related.

EQUAL PAY: The Paycheck Fairness Act aims to close the gender wage gap by strengthening the Equal Pay Act, including limiting employers’ reliance on an applicant’s salary history, protecting workers from retaliation for discussing their wages, and requiring employers to prove that pay disparities are not solely related to gender.

• States can strengthen equal pay laws by mandating equal pay across both private and public sectors, and restricting pay secrecy practices and salary history requirements in the private sector. In New York and New Jersey, equal pay laws include a comprehensive list of protected classes (including gender identity or expression, sexual orientation, age, disability, and, in New York’s case, even domestic violence victim status).

PROTECTIONS FOR DOMESTIC WORKERS: The Domestic Workers Bill of Rights Act extends pay and leave rights to domestic workers while mandating health and safety precautions, including language around fair and fixed scheduling. Ten states, two major cities, and the District of Columbia have already passed their own domestic workers bill of rights.

HEAT PROTECTION STANDARDS: As temperatures and heat-related worker deaths continue to climb, a set of federal protections for all workers is essential. OSHA intends to issue a new regulation protecting indoor and outdoor workers from heat, but the rulemaking process takes time, and future administrations can change these rules.

• While we wait for a federal standard, states can implement their own heat-related worker protections. Oregon, Washington, California, Colorado, and Minnesota have issued their own heat standards. Other states should follow suit, and all should include protections for both outdoor and indoor workers.

RIGHTS TO ORGANIZE POLICIES
The federal government must enshrine the rights of workers to build power collectively. At the state level, the prevalence of “right-to-work” laws demonstrates the systematic approach to undermining worker power and the clear need for the federal government to protect workers’ rights to organize. To that end, the federal government has one crucial piece of legislation to pass:

• The Richard L. Trumka Protecting the Right to Organize Act (‘PRO’) Act, a bill that expands the protections around workers’ rights to bargain and organize as a collective.

States can support rights to organize, including by:

• Repealing “right-to-work” laws, as Michigan did this year.
• Protecting the rights of state and local employees, including public school teachers, to collectively bargain. Colorado and Nevada are good examples.
• Extending organizing rights to workers excluded by federal protections, including agricultural workers (like California has done) and domestic workers, as well as contractors and gig workers.

WHY IT MATTERS FOR INEQUALITY
Because the federal government fails to act to provide all workers with higher wages, universal access to paid leave, and rights to organize and bargain collectively, many working families are stuck in cyclical patterns of poverty. The impact of these policies (or lack thereof) does not fall equally on all communities; in fact, federal inaction is exacerbating inequality in the U.S., especially on lines of gender, race, and class.

FIGHTING INEQUALITY TO BUILD A BETTER WORLD

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