

Lawmakers haven't given up on Colorado's unions and neither should Polis

By Marianne Giordano

Guest Commentary

Forming a union — the most reliable pathway to the middle class — is hard enough in this country, but unfortunately it's harder in Colorado than many states thanks to a one-of-a-kind law that places unnecessary, redundant hurdles on workers.

At a time when federal worker protections are under attack, the National Labor Relations Board is being gutted, and Americans live with such financial stress that they are often too intimidated to speak up at their workplaces, it's time for state leaders to make it easier for working people to win the lifechanging benefits of a union.

As the president of Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 30, I've seen these challenges firsthand, as we recently won a first contract for workers who support refugees and people in conflict zones at the International Rescue Committee's Denver office.

Through steadfast organizing, these OPEIU members won pay increases, more sick days and a voice in their workplace. But these wins did not come without

additional challenges that deter workers across the state from organizing unions of their own. Not only did they have to win an election to form a union, but they then had to win an election to charge union dues, and will have to do so again for each future contract, an onerous requirement that none of the other twelve IRC offices we represent have to deal with.

Due to the so-called Labor Peace Act, Coloradans have never enjoyed the full benefits of the National Labor Relations Act, which protect Americans' right to unionize, bringing them salaries 10% higher on average than their non-union counterparts. The state's rampant inequality is the direct by-product of outdated laws that created a system designed to impede the growth of unions with the explicit original purpose of quelling interracial organizing. These laws leave Colorado's union density lagging behind the national rate and have inspired anti-union legislation nationally.

To bring these contract wins to workers throughout Colorado, it is essential that we amend the so-called Labor Peace Act now

and pass HB 1005, a bill spearheaded by Representatives Javier Mabrey and Jennifer Bacon and Senators Jessie Danielson and Iman Jodeh. We call on Governor Jared Polis to start listening to workers across the state and sign this vital legislation when it lands on his desk again this year.

By forcing workers to constantly re-vote on whether dues can be deducted, employers can easily undermine the will of their employees by prioritizing anti-union hires and undermining the financial stability of the union. This law also forces workers to endlessly focus on rallying their colleagues around the very preservation of their union, diverting limited resources that could be used to fix workplace issues.

Despite Colorado's law being positioned as a "compromise" between workers and management, the Labor Peace Act actually plays out more like the famously anti-union "right-to-work" laws seen elsewhere. In these states, union density is lower and workers earn an average of \$1,670 less than their counterparts in states that protect union security.

This is the difference between a family being thrown out on the streets or having enough money for rent, parents having the resources to send their children to college, or a senior being able to enjoy a dignified retirement. For people who must work for a living, who don't have hundreds of millions to sustain them as they bounce between political offices, this \$1,670 can mean everything.

The amendment would remove this burdensome extra vote and bring Colorado's labor laws up to the standards of states ranging from California to Montana, sending a message that Colorado is serious about developing an economy that provides working people access to a comfortable middle-class life.

At a moment when 70% of the country approve of labor unions and our federal government has waged a full-on war against workers, amending this backwards law is essential for working Coloradans to win what they are owed.

And at a time when insurance premiums are soaring and Medicaid as we know it could disappear, workers need the employer-provided health insur-

ance that they are almost twice as likely to receive through a collectively bargained contract. Our recent victory at IRC exemplifies this, bringing Denver workers higher incomes, better work-life balances and increased job stability.

The law as it stands does not reflect Coloradans' values, and OPEIU encourages Governor Polis to follow Michigan's 2023 repeal of right-to-work and make it easier for Colorado workers to win the better wages, benefits and working conditions they are entitled to — and that union membership makes much more likely.

Marianne Giordano is a vice president at OPEIU who serves as executive director and CFO of Local 30, where she is also a Coalition Tri-Chair of Kaiser Permanente's Regional Labor Management Council, a member of the National Labor Management Council Steering Committee and a delegate to the Coalition of Labor Union Women. She is also an echo technologist in the Internal Medicine Cardiology Department at Kaiser Permanente San Diego.