

Virginians deserve the right to dignified work with a living wage | Guest column

Linda Bridges

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With labor unions under attack from the federal government, yet [more popular with Americans than ever](#), now is clearly not a good time for state legislators to pile on. But that is what happened earlier this month when state senators, following the lead of Governor Spanberger, ignored the call from labor unions and the [NAACP](#) to repeal Virginia's most infamous and effective union-busting embarrassment, its so-called "right-to-work" law. By allowing [SB 32](#) to die in committee, legislators on both sides of the aisle missed a vital opportunity to support workers at a time when they are under attack from all sides.

The only rights this 1947 law gives us are the right to silence our voice in the workplace, the right to be denied a living wage and the right to accept these conditions as unchangeable. The law, as it stands, is designed to deprive unions of the resources needed to help Virginia workers form unions of their own and win better wages, benefits and working conditions.

As a result, [Virginia's union membership rates are half the nationwide rate of 10%](#).

As president and business manager of Office and Professional Employees International Union Local 2 in Virginia, I recognize this campaign to uphold "right-to-work" laws for what it is — old-fashioned union busting.

In pushing to repeal "right-to-work," workers are not only up against politicians who oppose our right to organize, but also notoriously anti-union corporations like Amazon, UPS and Kaiser Permanente. Through the Virginia Chamber of Commerce, these companies fund misinformation campaigns and [lobby elected officials](#) with the goal of keeping as big a share of the profit for themselves as possible and leaving everyday workers to scramble to make ends meet.

OPEIU Local 2 represents more than 1,000 health care workers at Kaiser Permanente in Virginia, people essential for delivering the high-quality care we all require in our most desperate moments. Daily, these nurses, radiologists and pharmacists face down the health care giant's attempts to undermine their union, attacks largely enabled by the state's "right-to-work" laws.

Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, OPEIU members knew dramatic change was needed to provide better care, prevent future outbreaks and ensure hospitals were a feasible long-term workplace. Along with other unions, we demanded higher staffing levels, better salaries and more robust training. But these demands were deemed unreasonable by Kaiser, despite popular support among the public, and they refused to even negotiate with us.

In 2023, OPEIU Local 2 members [voted to join 85,000 Kaiser workers across the country in walking out on strike](#), the largest of its kind in U.S. history. Kaiser quickly saw how vital the workers are and, a few days later, offered 21% raises, a more streamlined hiring process and to host hiring events to recruit new

workers. We must carry the audacity of this historic strike with us as we strive to become a state that protects unions in workplaces where workers voted for one.

So why are corporations like Kaiser opposing the repeal while the country's largest federation of labor unions is supporting it? Because they know that "right-to-work" undermines workers' unions financially, prevents workers from gaining too much power and thus enables them to deny workers their fair share of their record profits. "Right-to-work" is fundamentally undemocratic and foments division among workers, allowing individuals to not contribute to a union that the majority agree should represent them.

Proponents of "right to-work" say it protects worker freedom, but what kind of freedom exists when workers are denied the chance to develop their collective power through a union?

The devastating impacts of "right-to-work" aren't just theory, but proven time and time again by numerous studies. For example, the Economic Policy Institute found that workers in "right-to-work" states earn [an average \\$1,670 less per year](#) than workers in states that protect union security.

At a time when workers are financially struggling throughout Virginia, there is no better opportunity to repeal this backward, outdated law designed to deprive workers of the chance to better their conditions. We applaud Sen. Carroll Foy's efforts this year and encourage Virginians to research how their elected officials stand on their right to organize a union. We call on legislators across the state to turn their ears to the majority of Virginians who agree we need to create an economy that works for all, and that the first step must be acknowledging we deserve more than the "right-to-work." We deserve the right to dignified work with a living wage.

Linda Bridges is a vice president at Office and Professional Employees International Union who serves as president and business manager at Local 2, which represents health care professionals, union staff and utility workers across Virginia, Washington, D.C. and Maryland. Bridges also serves as a trustee on multiple pension and health and welfare funds. She can be reached at frontdesk@opeiu.org.