

OPINIONS

Richmond Times-Dispatch

A Lee Enterprises Newspaper
opinions@timesdispatch.com • (804) 649-6007

KELLY TILL, President and Publisher
ENCARNACION PYLE, Executive Editor

To submit Letters to the Editor
letters@timesdispatch.com

Richmond.com/opinion

To submit or propose guest columns
oped@timesdispatch.com

Engage on Twitter @RTDOpinions

Editorials by The Times-Dispatch are based on a consensus of the editorial board. The views expressed in other editorials, columns and letters on this page are those of the authors and don't necessarily reflect the views of The Times-Dispatch.

COLLECTIVE POWER IN VIRGINIA

We deserve dignified work with living wage

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 Gov. Spanberger, ignored the call from labor unions and the NAACP to repeal



LINDA BRIDGES

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.

CRYPTO MARKET STRUCTURE LEGISLATION

Why Congress can't back down now

Digital assets hold real potential for hardworking Virginia families seeking to navigate today's affordability crisis, build financial security, and diversify their long-term savings and investments. For me, and many other Americans, crypto is a growing part of our retirement nest egg and an opportunity to secure financial stability. These innovations deserve room to grow, but not at the expense of clear rules,



CRAIG BIBER

strong oversight and accountability, especially considering their impact on the life savings of working and middle-class families.

That's why I found it extremely disheartening that after months of bipartisan Senate negations some crypto special interests pulled their support when meaningful progress was at hand, preferring the status quo where investors are without established safeguards in modern markets. That is a fantasy and a roadblock to progress. We can't let special interests veto solutions that protect middle-class savers while enabling responsible innovation.

This crypto market structure legislation being considered in Congress will help define how digital asset markets operate and usher in a new era of financial innovation. Getting this framework right matters not just for the future of the crypto industry,

but for Americans whose savings and retirement accounts intersect with these markets. And the stakes extend far beyond the borders of the United States. How Congress chooses to regulate digital assets will determine our global crypto standing and impact global regulatory frameworks and market behavior for years to come.

Whether in local politics or public service, I've observed that reform frameworks are only effective when rooted in trust and transparency. Trust comes from creating rules that apply to all, including guardrails that prevent fraud and abuse, and granting regulators the authority to step in before harm spreads. That is why Congress must include clear rules of the road and core investor safeguards like registration requirements, best execution obligations, volatility controls, and anti-fraud and market manipulation rules.

Alternatively, when legislation includes broad carve-outs or unresolved exemptions, it raises legitimate concerns about who benefits from the ambiguity. History tells us that when accountability is unclear, everyday investors are the ones left exposed. This is where the current debate risks losing focus. Decentralized finance (DeFi) raises complex issues around accountability, disclosure, enforcement, and investor protections that deserve serious consideration. Even so, Congress should not abandon its thoughtful, consensus-driven approach to the DeFi debate and proposals

that balance innovation with investor protections.

Congress cannot let crypto special interests continue to stand in the way of an open debate and amendment process on the merits of this legislation. The Senate has made meaningful, bipartisan progress on this legislation, creating opportunity to protect everyday Americans' investments and savings and instill investor confidence and trust in the market. If lawmakers want this bill to succeed, the most responsible path forward is to advance clear, comprehensive market structure rules while allowing space and time for a thoughtful, deliberate debate on the reforms that require further consensus.

America's leadership in financial innovation has never come from cutting corners, but by pairing ambition with responsibility. That standard should guide crypto reform as well, especially when the financial security of millions of Americans is on the line.

Markets work best when they are fair, transparent, and accountable. That principle cannot change. As legislators work to bring the market structure bill to markup, I hope their deliberation is thorough and thoughtful and keeps everyday investors top of mind.

Craig Bieber is a retired government affairs executive who lives in Henrico. He served as executive director of the Democratic Party of Virginia from 1998-2000 and also served as chair of the Spotsylvania Democratic Committee.

INVESTING IN COMMONWEALTH'S FUTURE

Our moment to speed biomedical R&D

Colin wears a Star Wars cap as he plays soccer in his yard, his wide smile showing the familiar mix of baby and adult teeth that mark childhood milestones. But Colin's story is anything but ordinary. At 8 years old, he survived childhood leukemia thanks to an emerging treatment — Chimeric antigen receptor (CAR) T-cell therapy. Now a thriving 12-year-old, he is living proof that investment in biomedical



MARK T. ESSER



MICHAEL J. FRIEDLANDER



B. FRANK GUPTON



ERIC WEISEL

research, powerful new diagnostics and therapeutics discovery, and advanced biopharmaceutical manufacturing can save lives right here in Virginia.

The need for better treatments and cures for conditions like Colin's cancer, as well as diabetes, heart disease, Alzheimer's and thousands of rare diseases, has never been more urgent. These illnesses take an enormous human toll and drive 90% of the nation's \$4.5 trillion-\$4.9 trillion in annual health care costs, a burden that will only escalate as the population ages and more patients live longer with multiple chronic conditions. Virginians and patients across the country are counting on a more innovative, efficient system to deliver scientifically informed preventions and treatments, including the medicines they need for improved health span vs. simply extended lifespan. The commonwealth is uniquely positioned to help meet that demand. By mobilizing the collective strengths at our research universities that include expertise in disease prevention, new tools for diagnostics including those that are enhanced by computational and engineering approaches, as well as drug discovery, development, translational capabilities and clinical trials, researchers

can accelerate the creation of new precision-targeted therapies while reducing the cost of essential medicines.

Virginia also sits between two established pharmaceutical hubs — North Carolina and Maryland, each built through decades of sustained public and private investments in life sciences. With Eli Lilly, AstraZeneca and Merck announcing more than \$12.5 billion in pharmaceutical manufacturing investments in the commonwealth and an additional \$120 million committed to world-class workforce training, Virginia is poised to build a fully integrated, globally competitive biomedical discovery and implementation enterprise.

As academic leaders working across the full spectrum of the biomedical and health sciences enterprise, we see firsthand how federal, state, industry and philanthropic investments accelerate innovation. Yet the purchasing power of federal research funding has remained flat for more than a decade even as the scientific and health care needs continue to grow. For Virginia, the lesson is clear: to create high-paying health science jobs, recruit and retain top researchers, attract funding from outside the commonwealth, and grow companies and venture capital, we must invest to compete — and invest to win.

Importantly, Virginia has already laid strong groundwork. Since 2022, the commonwealth has committed approximately \$500 million to biotechnology, life sciences and biopharmaceutical process development, supporting regional innovation and biomanufacturing clusters anchored by leading universities and health systems.

Those investments are delivering impact:

■ **UVA's Paul and Diane Manning Institute of Biotechnology** has drawn more than \$350 million of public and private investment to advance immunotherapy, gene therapy and drug delivery technologies and help attract AstraZeneca's new manufacturing plant to central Virginia.

■ **Old Dominion University** has received \$4 million to advance its Digital Patient model, applying a legacy of defense-inspired modeling and simulation research to build comprehensive human biological system models spanning physiology, behavior and

cognition — enabling personalized medicine, disease modeling and AI-enhanced clinical training that connects drug discovery to workforce readiness and improved patient outcomes.

■ **Virginia Tech's Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at VTC** with \$240 million in current research funding, including major federal and private investment with nationally leading programs in cancer, heart disease and neuroscience, has secured \$26.5 million in support from the commonwealth for a clinical trial-based Patient Research Center.

■ **VCU's Medicines for All Institute (M4All)** has received over \$60 million from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation to drive cost-reducing pharmaceutical process innovations for essential medicines. M4All is now developing a new scale-up manufacturing facility to support statewide clinical-trial needs beginning in 2027.

These initiatives operate with meaningful oversight and strategic coordination through the Virginia Innovation Partnership Authority (VIPA), which ensures that state investments are disciplined, leveraged and aligned for maximum public benefit.

Now is the time for Virginia to build on this momentum by doubling down on both cutting-edge research and the foundational biomedical science that underpins breakthrough diagnostics and therapies.

Leaders across research institutions, the governor and General Assembly, industry, philanthropy and local communities share a collective responsibility to invest in Virginia's future. The health and well-being of our family, friends and neighbors depend on it. Virginia's patients are waiting.

Mark T. Esser is chief scientific officer and head of the University of Virginia Paul and Diane Manning Institute of Biotechnology. Michael J. Friedlander is vice president for health sciences and technology at Virginia Tech University and executive director of the Fralin Biomedical Research Institute at Virginia Tech Carilion. B. Frank Gupton is chief executive officer of Medicines for All Institute at VCU. Eric Weisel is senior associate vice president for enterprise research and innovation at Old Dominion University and co-director of ODU's National Center for Collaboration in Medical Modeling and Simulation.