

# OPEIU CONNECT

Issue 564, Spring 2026



# VICTORY

FOR NONPROFIT WORKERS



## It is Our Charge to Defend Democracy

By Tyler Turner  
President

In February, the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics released its annual report on union density for 2025. The news was encouraging: 16.5 million workers in the U.S. were represented by a union last year, an increase of 463,000 from the year before.

The growth was not driven by a booming labor market. In fact, 2025 will go down as the worst year in hiring since the Covid-19 recession labor market of 2020. To find a slower market in a non-recession year we have to look back to 2003. The growth in union density happened because working people are fighting back against the most anti-union administration in this country's history.

This is perhaps most evident in the rise in union density among federal workers, despite the slashing of federal jobs and repeated attacks on their unions. At a time when the current administration attempts to undermine existing collective bargaining rights and the paths to forming a union while eroding already weak labor laws, more and more working people are putting their faith in unions.

Of course, the report does not capture the full scope of organizing in the country. It does not include every campaign underway or every victory where workers are still fighting for a first contract. It only reflects those already covered by a collective bargaining agreement or who have secured their first contract. But it also shows where momentum is building.

Nearly half, 46 percent, of all net union gains came from the South, which is remarkable given the obstacles unions face there. For decades, southern states have been treated as testing grounds for some of the most aggressive anti-worker, anti-union and anti-human rights policies in the country. Special interest groups

and anti-worker politicians have used the South to advance so-called right-to-work laws, more accurately described as "right-to-work-for-less laws," aimed at weakening unions, silencing workers and suppressing wages under the guise of economic development. In Virginia, lawmakers have had repeated opportunities to oppose this law that does not serve working people. Time and again, they chose corporate interests over their constituents. [See pg. 5 for more about how OPEIU local unions are fighting back against these unfair right-to-work laws.]

Even in this hostile environment, workers in the South are organizing and winning. Historic victories at companies such as Volkswagen Chattanooga in Tennessee and at hospitals such as Ascension Seton Medical Center Austin in Texas are showing what is possible. OPEIU's own national campaign at the International Rescue Committee (IRC) began in Texas, which is hardly the friendliest environment for organizing. Today, Texas ranks fourth in the nation for union membership, trailing only California, New York and Illinois, proof no part of this country is beyond the reach of progress when workers decide to stand together to raise the standards for everyone.

The report also confirms what many of us already know: younger workers and workers of color are driving the growth of

our movement. They see unions as the most effective way to close racial and gender wage gaps, protect healthcare, secure stable careers and challenge the outsized power of the billionaire class. They recognize unions are not only about better contracts, but also about building a more just society. Their energy and social consciousness are transforming our movement.

Take Minneapolis, where unions, including our own Local 12, were at the forefront of mass mobilizations and actions to confront the occupation and brutality of federal Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents. They organized, negotiated shutdowns and filled the streets to defend their community. That is the power of a movement that doesn't stop at the shop floor. When unions act in solidarity with immigrant workers and vulnerable communities, we put our principles into action. An injury to one truly is an injury to all.

OPEIU must remain vocal and lead on these issues. That means continuing to open our doors to more workers and making sure new voices have a real role in shaping our future. Yes, we must fight for strong contracts, enforce our agreements and win on grievances. But we must also recognize the stakes are larger than any single workplace. It is our charge to defend not only our jobs but also our democracy.

***[U]nions are not only about better contracts, but also about building a more just society.***

## Much at Stake for Workers in Midterm Elections

The upcoming midterm elections will be a referendum on Congress' recent actions as much as on the Trump administration's anti-worker policies. Members of Congress will have to answer for all they have done to hurt the American people, including supporting the law causing more than 10 million Americans to lose health insurance and cutting millions of dollars from the budgets of agencies protecting our rights, such as the National Labor Relations Board and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Working people have a real chance to pump the brakes on the anti-worker agenda. Congressional leaders are already talking about passing a second iteration of the so-called One Big Beautiful Bill that would further undermine our health insurance and upset an already challenging housing market. Do we want to let them get a second bite at the apple?

Every member of the House of Representatives is up for re-election. Of the 435 seats in the House, Republicans currently hold a slim majority of just five votes. Control of the House next year will come down to a handful of swing districts, including approximately 20 "toss-up" districts that could be won by either party. Currently, almost all of the toss-up districts are held by Republicans. OPEIU members live and work in a number of the districts where races that will decide the majority are being held.

On the Senate side, Republicans' 53-seat majority looks much safer. Democrats will have to fight to hold potentially vulnerable seats in Georgia and Michigan, while their opportunities to make gains will be in tough races in states such as Alaska, Maine, North Carolina and

Ohio. Either party could gain or lose a few seats, but it would take something of a blue wave to flip the upper chamber.

Savvy candidates in both parties are focusing their pitches to voters around tackling the affordability crisis. That is not surprising considering the soaring costs of groceries, utilities, health insurance and other household expenses.

The question is whether we can trust — or should support with our votes — any legislator who voted to make our healthcare more expensive or did nothing to stop the tariffs driving up our cost of living.

OPEIU just conducted a national membership survey to hear about the issues that matter to you and your family and learn about member priorities. These results will guide our work through the midterms and beyond. Look for details about the results of this survey in future issues of OPEIU Connect.

We need your help to ensure candidates are elected who are willing to fight for what matters to OPEIU members. Let us make the most of this year's elections and remind our leaders they work for us. Contact your local union and get involved today!



OPEIU members get out the vote in Pennsylvania in Oct. 2024.

***The question is whether we can trust — or should support with our votes — any legislator who voted to make our healthcare more expensive or did nothing to stop the tariffs driving up our cost of living.***

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**On our cover:** Members of the International Rescue Committee Workers Union (IRCWU) bargaining committee and their OPEIU representatives from local unions throughout the country during contract negotiations Jan. 14 in New York City. See pg. 12 cover story, *IRC Workers Ratify First Contract Covering 700 Employees Nationwide*, to read more about this historic victory for nonprofit workers and all people who care about the rights of refugees and those living in conflict zones.



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OPEIU Fights Back Against Anti-Worker Laws

When International Rescue Committee (IRC) employees in offices around the country ratified their first collective bargaining agreements earlier this year, the new OPEIU members of Local 30 (Region V) in Denver faced an obstacle their co-workers in other offices did not.

Thanks to a one-of-its-kind state law, Colorado's so-called Labor Peace Act, union security clauses are illegal unless workers approve them in a separate vote. This often means a third vote — the first for representation, the second for ratification and a third for the union security clause.

This unique law, passed 80 years ago by a coalition of railroad tycoons, anti-union activists and racists with ties to the Ku Klux Klan, was a significant influence on the landmark national union-busting law, the Taft-Hartley Act of 1947. It is also a major reason why Colorado's union density skews closer to states with the also misleadingly named right-to-work laws, which correspond to lower wages and higher workplace mortality.

Winning strong contracts is a key part of OPEIU's work protecting and uplifting members, but anti-worker laws like the Labor Peace Act show our work cannot stop at ratification. At a time when it feels like our rights are under attack on all sides, we are adopting a strategy known to sports fans everywhere: the best defense is a good offense.

That is why Local 30 has joined the fight against Colorado's outdated anti-worker law, writing to state officials in support of a bill to remove unnecessary obstacles to strong unions. The state's largest newspaper, The Denver Post, published an op-ed from Local 30 Executive Director

and Chief Financial Officer Marianne Giordano in support of the bill, which is currently moving through the legislature. Giordano is also a vice president on the OPEIU Executive Board.

Local 2 (Region II) has taken aim at anti-worker policy in Virginia, supporting a long-overdue repeal of the state's right-to-work law. An op-ed penned by Local 2 President and Business Manager Linda Bridges condemning the state legislature's failure to act was recently published in the Richmond Times-Dispatch. Bridges is also a vice president on the OPEIU Executive Board.

Reversing these union-busting laws will likely be multi-year efforts. The Colorado bill passed last session before being vetoed by its Democratic governor and the Virginia bill died in committee in February. Undoing decades-old anti-worker laws is tough work, especially when our opposition is willing to spend millions to avoid paying working people what we are worth.

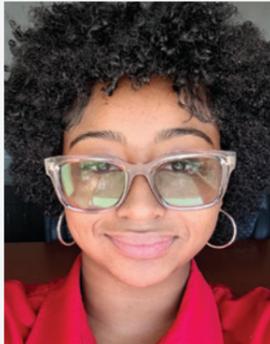
Fortunately, workers in Colorado, Virginia and throughout the country can look to the example of others, such as OPEIU members in Michigan, who worked for years in a historic campaign by working people to overturn right-to-work there.

Just like the IRC workers who took the hard step to organize, union members put in the work today to ensure one day life becomes a little easier for us and those who come after us.



Members of Local 42 in Detroit and Local 459 in Lansing (both Region VII) in 2023 join the fight to successfully overturn Michigan's so-called right-to-work law, making it easier for working people to reap the benefits of union membership.

# Be the Change You Want to See



Kayla Jackson



Ty Anthony

By Kayla Jackson and Ty Anthony  
Stewards

People Driven Credit Union of Michigan  
Local 42 (Region VII)  
Farmington Hills, Michigan

As a new steward team, we are learning every day how best to support our colleagues. We are not only training ourselves to address workplace issues, but are also working to earn the trust of our 57 co-workers across six locations so they feel confident bringing those issues to us.

Building trust starts with listening. One of our first steps as People Driven's new steward team was to survey our colleagues about the challenges affecting their work lives. Their responses are helping us document concerns, identify patterns and begin preparing for the renegotiation of our contract in 2028.

We believe an engaged steward team makes everyone's work life better. That is why we have focused on consistent communication and creating systems that help us defend and strengthen our contract. One practical improvement we implemented is a shared Google Form allowing co-workers to report workplace concerns in a centralized and accessible way. When a submission comes in, one of us reaches out directly to begin addressing the issue. We then debrief together to ensure we are aligned and fully informed. This approach helps us respond efficiently while staying united as a team.

Although we are still growing into our roles, we are approaching the future with confidence. Our co-workers elected us to be their advocates, and we take the responsibility seriously. Change does not happen overnight but it does happen through steady effort, clear communication and consistent follow-through. Being available, responsive and committed to truly listening — to understand, not just to respond — has already begun to strengthen our workplace relationships.

We are committed to being the change we want to see. Through thoughtful stewardship and collective action, we are laying the groundwork for meaningful improvements in our next contract. We are not afraid to stand up or speak out because lasting change often begins with those willing to take the first step.

*Kayla Jackson is a senior member service representative at the People Driven Credit Union of Michigan headquarters in Southfield, Michigan. Ty Anthony is a head teller at the Warren branch.*

*Change does not happen overnight but it does happen through steady effort, clear communication and consistent follow-through.*



## Stay Connected!

Keep up on news you can use about your union, including info about free membership benefits, such as scholarships, student debt reduction and identity theft protection.

**DON'T MISS OUT!**  
Sign up to receive texts from OPEIU.  
Text **OPEIU** to 877-363-0583.

Message and data rates may apply. You can cancel your participation in the OPEIU SMS at any time. To unsubscribe, text "STOP" to 877-363-0583. After you send the message "STOP," OPEIU will reply with a message to confirm you have been unsubscribed. After you opt out, you will no longer receive text messages from OPEIU.

# Union Membership Up to 16-Year High

**Despite intense pressure on labor unions across the country, a historic union-busting campaign against federal workers and little support from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), close to half-a-million Americans joined unions in 2025, according to new data released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).**

The new union members bring the total number of workers represented by unions to a 16-year high of 16.5 million — still only a quarter of the total workers estimated to want a union. But increasing union membership is a reassuring sign for a labor movement up against lawmakers and corporations openly hostile to collective bargaining.

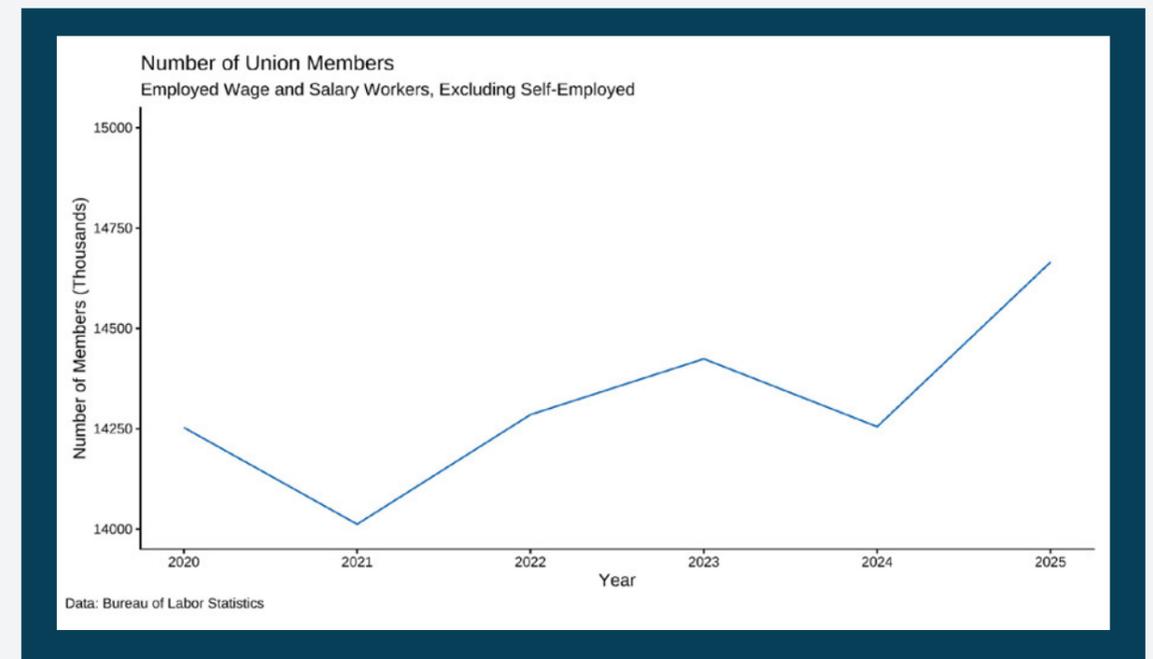
The data points to enormous opportunity for unions and for OPEIU in particular as the industries the union represents, such as insurance, have some of the lowest membership rates in the American workforce at only 1.2 percent. With the insurance industry employing 3 million people nationally, these numbers represent huge swaths of the country missing out on the higher pay and better benefits workers are more likely to get through a union.

The new data provides updated figures confirming the concrete impact labor unions have on the lives of their members. For example, the median salary of a nonunion worker in 2025 stood at 84 percent of the average union member's wage. But not everyone enjoys these benefits equally. Women

are still unionized at rates that lag behind men, and the data reveals an underrepresentation of Asian Americans in the labor movement. These lags, however, do not indicate a lack of interest in becoming union members. For example, young workers approve of unions at rates exceeding any other age group but enjoy the benefits of union membership at rates lower than any other group.

Shifts in industries and labor in the United States are also impacting union membership. Heavily unionized industries, such as manufacturing and mining, have been in decline, while less unionized industries, such as hospitality and technology, have been growing. This all comes as the NLRB faced significant funding cuts and lost 10 percent of its staff in 2025, making it difficult to enforce the few protections workers have against illegal employer behavior.

Despite the constant challenges from decades of policy aimed at impeding union growth, the data tells the story of a labor movement invigorated with a wave of grassroots, pro-union energy.



# OPEIU Discount College Benefit Inspires Myya Harris to Become a First-Generation College Graduate



Local 42 member Myya Harris graduates May 3, 2025.

Two decades after dropping out of college, Local 42 (Region VII) member Myya Harris thought her opportunity to earn a degree had long since passed.

But in 2023, she was reading OPEIU Connect when something caught her eye that made her reconsider her options. OPEIU's Discount College Benefit was accepting applications, she read, offering members and their families a substantial discount to enroll in online degree programs flexible to their busy schedules.

After completing the online application form, she realized there were many options that could easily fit her work schedule and would only cost her a fraction of the typical tuition per semester. There was no way she could miss this opportunity.

In spring 2025, two years after deciding to take the leap to become a student again, Harris became the first member of her family to earn a college degree, graduating cum laude from Trine University. The process was invigorating, inspiring her to now pursue a Master of Business Administration degree with a concentration in human resources.

Harris said the degrees will enable her to continue the job she loves at the Michigan Conference of Teamsters Welfare Fund while growing her skills, and thus options, for the future. But the benefits of the degree go far beyond the workplace.

"More than anything, I just feel like the program helped with my overall mental health and self-esteem and confidence, providing me with the tools to see something through," Harris said. "I wish I had kids because your kids can go and your spouse is eligible too."

Harris said it was simple to enroll and fit classes around her schedule. To start, members fill out an online form matching them with one of more than 250 programs from multiple schools offering degrees ranging from associate to masters. Members or their families then apply to options they are matched with, which are all remote and offered at a deep discount.

Members can earn degrees in a range of topics aimed at helping them achieve their individualized goals around their specific schedules. Data shows workers with bachelor's degrees earn more than 50 percent higher wages on average than those without, which means pursuing a degree is a great decision for members exploring ways to increase their earnings.

Harris took classes on subjects ranging from psychology to public speaking with the intent of one day achieving a career in human resources.

"Don't get it twisted. Do not think it's going to be an easy ride. You have to dedicate hours and hours a week if you want to be successful. But they offer accelerated programs so if you just push through, before you know it, you'll be done," said Harris, who is currently a document processor.

A dozen members of Harris' family squeezed into their cars to drive from Detroit, Michigan, to the Angola, Indiana-based university in May to celebrate Harris' graduation and the moment's significance for the family overall. Harris said her family had such a good time that they are already preparing for her master's graduation.

Many of Harris' co-workers did not know she was enrolled in a degree program until she graduated. But they know now, as Harris cannot hold herself back from encouraging co-workers to enroll.

"If you have the opportunity to use the program, use it," Harris said. "What's the use of being in a union and paying union dues if you're not going to reap the benefits of it?"



Myya Harris celebrates with her mom, Vanessa, left, and aunt, Pamela Butler, right, on graduation day.

*"More than anything, I just feel like the program helped with my overall mental health and self-esteem and confidence, providing me with the tools to see something through."*



If you or a member of your family would like to take Harris' advice, visit [opeiu.org](https://opeiu.org) or scan the QR code for more information on the OPEIU Discount College Benefit.

# OPEIU President Tyler Turner Pursues Goal of Inclusivity, Seeks to Lift Up All Members' Voices

OPEIU President Tyler Turner was chosen to lead the union by the OPEIU Executive Board one year ago and in that time has made his top goal ensuring OPEIU is a diverse and inclusive union representing all members. “I want people to look at OPEIU and know this is a union where their voice matters and where they can grow with their union,” Turner told OPEIU Connect.

We sat down with Turner to discuss his priorities for the union, the steps being taken to ensure OPEIU is a member-driven organization and lessons learned throughout his career that guide his leadership. Below are excerpts from that conversation.

## Tell us about a memory from your childhood in the labor movement that inspired you to be where you are today.

My father was a union electrician, and my mother was a business representative and then later the president and business manager of the same local that I came out of, Local 277 in Ft. Worth, Texas, so I was fortunate to know what it means to be in a union family.

My mom took me everywhere with her. She was always talking about the union and what it meant to her. We would sit in her office well after her workday ended during the summer or after school waiting to see who would drop by. I'd play games or do homework and, one by one people would come. Sometimes there were issues in the workplace they wanted to discuss, and other times they were just stopping by to talk. She was always thoughtful and interested in whatever they wanted to talk about, and she knew everything about them — what their spouses did for work, how old their children were, where they'd been on vacation recently. She genuinely cared about them, and they knew it.

Years later, when I had left my first union job at Kaiser Permanente and had come to work for OPEIU, one of the first things she said to me was “It doesn't matter how important you think an issue is. It matters to that person, so it should matter to you.” I've never forgotten that, and that's what I try to center the work I do around.

## Who is someone you admire?

Having grown up in the union hall, there are an incredible number of people who have impacted me, but two in particular who I am constantly in awe of are Rose Agas-Yuu from the Hawai'i Nurses' Association/Local 50 in Hawai'i and Dina Carlisle from Local 40 in Michigan, who sit on the OPEIU Executive Board with me.

I can't think of anything more impressive than what the two of them do each day. Both of them are full-time registered nurses and



OPEIU President Tyler Turner speaks at the launch of the AFL-CIO's "It's Better in a Union" bus tour in July.

presidents of their locals, battling hospitals with endless resources and willingness to hire scab nurses. The way they engage with their members and pivot from being on the job as a nurse to putting their president hats on is the most inspiring thing I can think of.

It truly drives me to work harder and do better things because I can't imagine also having to deal with patient care and everything that comes along with being a nurse in a hospital.

## What's a unique lesson you've learned from organizing in Texas?

It's not impossible to organize where you don't have the protections other states have. Even in states with a higher union density, you should never miss an opportunity to get back to the roots of what we do in this movement.

It goes hand in hand with the importance of listening and being willing to adjust your mindset outside of your comfort zone. If there is any benefit to organizing in a state like Texas with such weak labor laws and low union density, it's that you get the opportunity every day to explain to someone what being in a union means and to let them craft the union they want to be a part of.

## Do you view artificial intelligence as something to be resisted or as an opportunity to negotiate for things like more time off or safer worksites?

The simple answer is, as a union, I don't think we should embrace AI and automation. The promise of AI was to improve work-life balance and make things better for working people. Instead, we've watched our members lose jobs and have hours reduced while employers seek to do more with less and maximize their profits over the well-being of employees. The promise of a four-day workweek because we've become more efficient hasn't come to fruition.

Meanwhile, we've watched AI companies and their data centers pollute and drain the water supplies of local communities and consume massive amounts of energy, wreaking havoc on the environment. Beyond that, these tools are being weaponized to surveil the public, compile personal information and fill the internet with disinformation.

But AI presents a real opportunity for organizing in professional sectors like law, finance and insurance. Law firms have laid off staff who do research, administrative work and marketing not because of what AI is doing, but because of what they think it will do. Those workers are going to be looking for protection from the impact of AI.

## What do you think of ICE and their immigration raids over the last year?

I was watching their raids on the news in horror, but the full impact didn't hit me until one of our members was ripped from his car here in Dallas and transported hundreds of miles away to Eloy, Arizona, where he was unjustly detained for a year. I don't understand how anyone can watch what's happening to people in this country and approve of it. It's inhumane. It's cruel. And the truth is, this has impacted communities for years, but it's now just happening on this unimaginable scale. We can't bury our heads in the sand and hope this goes away.

*“My biggest goal for OPEIU is to foster inclusivity and bring in new and different perspectives.”*

I'm particularly concerned about our member, a man who through his work assisted the U.S. government [as a translator in Afghanistan]. Then he was imprisoned by it. These are our neighbors, our friends and our co-workers. Labor has a duty to resist this terror and abuse of power.

## You're at the start of your tenure, but in the long run, what impact do you hope to have on OPEIU?

I want to be known for lifting other people up. My biggest goal for OPEIU is to foster inclusivity and bring in new and different perspectives. Maybe even more important than that is developing a pathway for the next generation of leaders. Our membership is so diverse, and we should do everything we can to uplift their voices and include them in decision making at every moment. I want people to look at OPEIU and know this is a union where their voice matters and where they can grow with their union.

I also really want to build strong, inclusive, capable locals where members not only feel empowered to participate but are able to do so with ease. I want OPEIU to be known for how we educate and train our members and for being able to mobilize at a moment's notice. I want people to join OPEIU because it's clear we're a member-led organization, not a top-down structure.

## If I'm an OPEIU member who wants to get more involved in the union, what do you recommend I do?

Show up. Don't be afraid to ask questions. Read your constitution. If our members aren't involved, we become stagnant, and we become weak. It's important for our members and their employers to realize it's not the officers of OPEIU who are the union: it's the members. And there's nothing scarier to a boss than an educated union member who isn't afraid to talk to their co-workers and mobilize around an issue.



Follow President Turner on BlueSky by scanning the QR code.

# IRC Workers Ratify First Contract Covering 700 Employees Nationwide

Nearly 700 OPEIU members at 13 International Rescue Committee (IRC) offices nationwide ratified their first union contract, “a massive victory for nonprofit workers and all people who care about the rights of refugees and those living in conflict zones,” said Tyler Turner, OPEIU president.

IRC workers earned immediate raises, a stronger voice in their workplace and improved workplace safety standards, among many contract highlights specific to their unique responsibilities. They also secured permanent employment for workers previously considered “limited-term staff,” a designation used to deny them benefits and divide the workers.

What started in 2023 as a conversation between co-workers about unsustainable working conditions turned into a national

movement, as OPEIU now represents more than half of the offices in the United States at one of the world’s largest nonprofits. So far, IRC workers have won union recognition in 15 of the 29 IRC offices nationwide. Workers in Charlottesville and Richmond, Virginia, have affiliated since the contract was ratified, a testament to the group’s dedication to organizing and their desire for change.

“This contract means I don’t have to beg to be treated fairly, that I can comfortably push back on the abuses from my employer. It

means now I have policies in place at the worksite I helped craft that are worker-centered and are realistic expectations made by people who are actually doing the work,” said Grace Aguirre, crisis case manager at IRC’s Oakland office. “I can now show up to my job, which is to care for children and their families, knowing there is a contract and union taking care of me.”

The IRC was founded by Albert Einstein in 1933 to support refugees fleeing Nazi Germany and continues to provide emergency relief and long-term aid to people who have escaped or are currently living in conflict zones. Amidst a surge of war and authoritarianism globally, as well as increased persecution of immigrants in the U.S., this work has never been more vital. These proud OPEIU members provide classes, social services and legal assistance to refugees across the country and support on-the-ground initiatives in high-risk countries, such as Ukraine, Syria and Sudan.

Until now, people who do this vital work were not offered sufficient training or resources to effectively address the complex issues they deal with every day. Thanks to their new union contract, IRC workers will finally receive a more robust orientation covering topics essential to keep them and their clients safe, as well as salary increases beginning to account for inflation, increased workloads and the importance of the work. “Winning our contract was an incredibly emotional experience,” said Jodi Camino, a

school success caseworker in IRC’s Atlanta office. “Experiencing that win in community really reminded me that — in addition to the contract articles that will make a really concrete difference in my financial security, working conditions and quality of life — our biggest win is that we now have a voice, community and collective power.”

While the various offices are represented by different local unions, this contract covers OPEIU members nationwide. IRC workers were inspired by successful unionization efforts at some of the nonprofit’s overseas offices and hope their victory will encourage nonunion IRC workers across the country and world to organize.

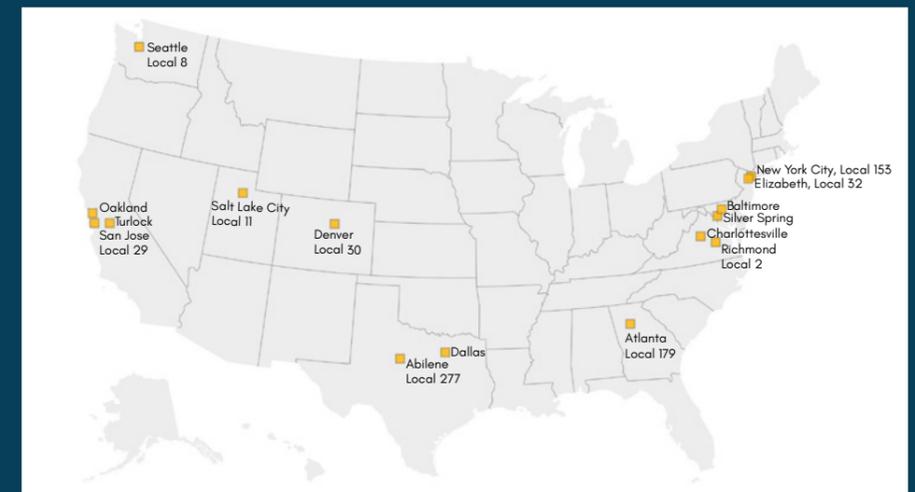


IRCWO Oakland members in August 2024.



IRCWO members rally for their first contract at IRC headquarters in New York City in August.

## Unionized IRC Offices in the United States



## Local 8 Members at Seattle Housing Authority Ratify New Contract in Historically Challenging Times

About 200 members of Local 8 (Region VI) employed by the Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) ratified a three-year contract in early February after successfully bargaining for wage increases, stronger time-off policies and increased job security.

SHA is a public housing agency in Seattle administering a range of federally funded housing programs for close to 40,000 low-income tenants. The bargaining unit is comprised of people essential to the management and maintenance of the buildings.

Contract terms were negotiated against the backdrop of a historically challenging moment, both economically and politically, for the agency as federal funding cuts threaten the existence of public housing authorities nationwide. Despite this pressure, members showed up, stayed engaged and made their voices heard throughout the process, decorating their cubicles with signs carrying messages like "Proud Union Member" and "Put the Money Where the Mission Is!" Through their organizing efforts, SHA workers successfully pushed the agency to invest in its frontline staff. The contract gains represent long-overdue recognition for the workers' commitment to supporting Seattle's low-income residents.

"We successfully pushed to get our employer to meaningfully recognize our years of service, and we won a substantial wage

adjustment for long-term employees like me," said Vernida Jackson, a purchaser who has worked at SHA for 35 years and served on the bargaining committee. "That's the power of our union!"

Local 8 members won improved layoff language and bereavement benefits, as well as increased flexibility for compensatory time usage and cashing out vacation time. SHA workers will also receive wage increases in several ways, including long-overdue pay adjustments for long-term employees and targeted wage improvements for specific job classifications that have fallen behind market standards.

Workers said a large reason for their victory was the unity they built throughout the negotiations and the reminder they could accomplish ambitious goals with collective power. Shannon Mains, an assistant property manager and steward at SHA, who has also been there for 35 years, said the contract wins made the fight worth it.

"This significant wage upgrade is more than just a line on our pay scale. It's something we deserve and have been fighting hard for," Mains said.



Members of the Seattle Housing Authority bargaining team Jan. 29 after a tentative agreement was reached. The agreement was later voted on and ratified by the membership. Left to right, standing, are Ezra Avignon, Eli Waldman, Jesse Aldazabal, Sophia Phillips, Deanna Montgomery, seated, Vernida Jackson, Amanda Davidson, Local 8 Director of Negotiations Valarie Peaphon and Shannon Mains.



Members of CfA Workers United, who all work remotely, gather at an October event in Oakland.

## Code for America Workers Ratify New Contract Averting Strike

Employees at Code for America (CfA), a civic tech nonprofit, voted to ratify a two-year collective bargaining agreement in early January, averting a strike in the process. Their union, CfA Workers United, is affiliated with Local 174 (Region V) in Burbank, California.

The contract — a successor agreement that follows the expiration of their first contract negotiated in October 2023 — maintains many of the gains won in that first agreement, including 17 weeks of parental leave, 80 percent coverage of dependent healthcare, layoff protections and sabbatical benefits.

The agreement addresses major priorities from the bargaining unit, preserving benefits such as remote work, health insurance options, unlimited paid time off and a flexible 401(k) retirement plan. Other highlights of the contract include an annual budget for professional development, training on artificial intelligence and fertility and adoption benefits.

In late December, prior to the contract's expiration on Jan. 1, 92 percent of CfA workers voted to authorize a strike upon the contract's expiration. Pressure from CfA workers, with support from community members in Oakland, where CfA is headquartered, led to substantial progress at the bargaining table. Both sides agreed to extend the contract deadline by one week. In that week, negotiators were able to reach a tentative agreement preserving the most important aspects of the contract amid uncertain funding for the nonprofit.

"CfA Workers United is pleased to have avoided a strike while coming to an agreement preserving healthcare benefits, a major priority for our bargaining unit," said Zach Antoyan, a bargaining committee member and program manager who has worked at the organization for five years. "We look forward to getting back to our important work and improving government services across the country.

"Everyone at CfA is here for an explicit purpose," Antoyan added. "I don't think anyone at the organization believes this is just a job, or something that's even just a stepping stone. Most of us are here because we want to be, and we want to have that impact and the work means a great deal to all of us. The level of freedom, flexibility, safety and security our contract affords us allows us to really jump into our work without anxiety."

CfA partners with federal, state and local governments to modernize and digitize functions to make it easier for citizens to access government benefits, including food assistance and tax services.

The contract expires Dec. 1, 2027.

*"The level of freedom, flexibility, safety and security our contract affords us allows us to really jump into our work without anxiety."*



*Rising Star Coffee Roasters employees, now members of Local 792, last summer.*

## Rising Star Coffee Workers Win Election, Joining Local 792

**Workers at Rising Star Coffee Roasters, a chain of coffee shops in Northeast Ohio, voted Jan. 7 to join Local 792 (Region VII) in Toledo. Forty-one baristas across seven locations will now begin bargaining for a first contract.**

Organizing efforts began at the chain's Lakewood location in July, when a construction crew's gas generator began leaking toxic fumes from a unit above the shop. At least one barista went to the hospital. Workers began circulating a petition to management on safety concerns, organizing a community "sip in" — where more than 200 paying customers flooded the store in solidarity — and considering unionization.

Through the Northeast Ohio Workers' Center, Rising Star employees were connected with Local 792, and, after exploring their options, decided to affiliate with OPEIU. Covered roles include baristas, head roasters, delivery drivers and coffee production workers.

"We had a pretty public campaign early on, and there were several unions that were kind of wary about taking on a super public campaign," said Bash Cromwell, a barista at the chain's Hingetown store and a member of the organizing committee. "Only OPEIU expressed support. We were excited. It felt like a good match."

By unionizing, Rising Star baristas hope to address several concerns spanning all seven locations, including safety, pay, scheduling, benefits and gaining respect in the workplace.

"I think a lot of people feel like the majority of what happens behind the bar at our locations could be fixed before they even start, if there was better communication," Cromwell continued.

Support from the local community was critical in building organizing momentum within the shops. "It really meant a lot that we had customers at all of our locations come up to us and say, 'we're supportive of you all doing this work, and we care that you are treated well,'" Cromwell said. "It only made it even more worth fighting for."

Amy Wainwright, a barista at the Cleveland Heights location and an organizing committee member, agreed. "Before becoming a barista, I was a longtime regular. I could see this bigger pattern of behavior, though it looked different at each shop," Wainwright said.

"At my shop in particular, the biggest thing for us has been — and this is also true elsewhere — wanting a pay increase," she continued. "Many of the baristas I work with have also worked at Starbucks. The pay at Starbucks is \$3 more for a starting rate and [there are] consistent raises. I do feel like getting more consistent raises is something every shop is asking for. At our location, I think we need more transparency from ownership."

## ITPEU Member Hui Cha Gray Celebrates 50 Years of Service

**Since 1975, Hui Cha Gray has served meals to service members and their families as a dining service attendant at PCSI Food and Dining Services at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas. Last year marked a half-century of service for Gray, who immigrated to the United States in 1973 to be with her husband, a service member she met while he was stationed in her home country of South Korea.**

While visiting with her next-door neighbor one day in 1975, Gray was asked if she wanted to work. She said yes. Her brother-in-law helped her fill out and submit her application to Fort Hood while her husband was stationed in Germany. Two years after arriving in Texas, Gray began working at Fort Hood. Fifty-one years later, through five different employers, Gray is still serving meals at the base.

Shortly after being hired, Gray joined her union, the Industrial Technical Professional Employees Union (ITPEU)/OPEIU Local 4873 (Region III), which she says is the reason she has been able to work for so long. "Someone asked if I wanted to be part of the union," she said. "Thankfully, I signed my union card."

"The union does right by me, and I would not have stayed as long if I was not protected by my union," she continued.

Gray has no immediate plans to retire. "My body is allowing me to still work, and I love what I do," she said.



*Hui Cha Gray*

## Local 32 Representative Elected Council Member for Darby Borough's Pennsylvania 1st Ward

**Local 32 Staff Representative Syreeta Bullock has dedicated her career to advocating for workers' rights and well-being. As an experienced union organizer, Bullock successfully organized professional employees in various sectors, including behavioral health, healthcare, clerical and teaching.**

Now Bullock is taking that experience and determination to her new role representing the people of Pennsylvania. Bullock was sworn in Jan. 5 as a council member of Darby Borough in Pennsylvania's 1st Ward. She is passionate about ensuring all residents of Darby Borough receive the resources and support they deserve and that their voices are heard on issues impacting working families. She is also excited to continue serving and growing the membership of Local 32 (Region II).



*Syreeta Bullock*

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## New Minimum Wage Increases Raise the Floor for Women and Workers of Color, Report Says

As 2026 began, 8.3 million workers across the country saw a significant change in their earnings, as minimum wages increased in 19 states to help the nation's worst-paid workers deal with the skyrocketing cost of living.

According to an analysis from the Economic Policy Institute, a progressive think tank, these minimum wage increases will impact women of color the most and positively affect the well-being of 4.8 million children. There are now more workers in states where the minimum wage is \$15 per hour or higher than in states where it sits at the federal minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, a rate below the poverty line.

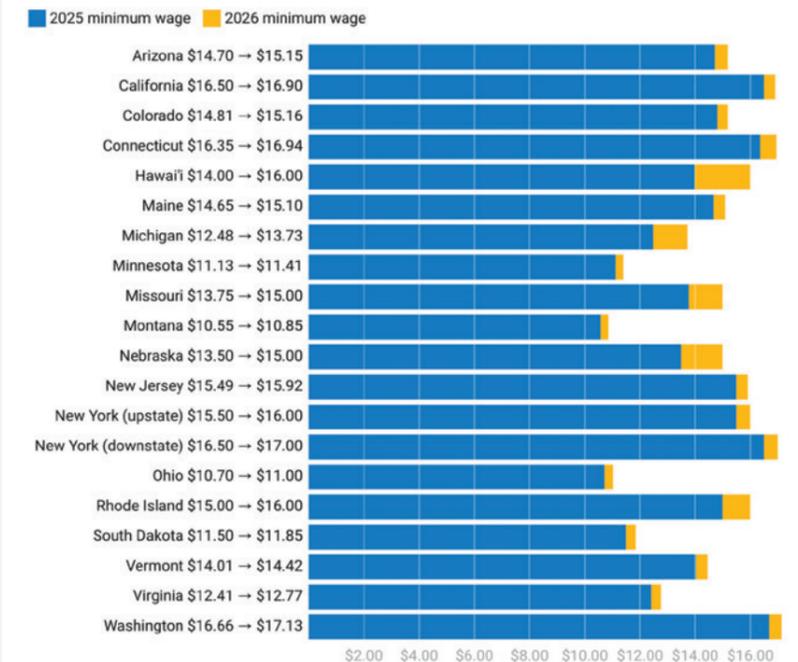
Despite a widespread misconception that minimum-wage jobs are usually held by teenagers or part-time workers, the study found close to 90 percent of those set to be impacted are adults and about half are full-time workers. The workers are also disproportionately Black and Latino and about one in five live in poverty. The study also disputes arguments that minimum wage increases harm the job market, citing past research that consistently finds no job loss after minimum wage hikes.

Sixteen states across the country still have a minimum wage of \$7.25 per hour, or \$15,080 per year if working full time, even though this is insufficient to live comfortably anywhere in the country. The value of this wage has eroded by more than 30 percent since it was set in 2009, and the 17-year period since marks the longest the country has gone without an increase since the federal minimum wage was established in 1938. With inaction on the federal level, states and cities across the country have improved their own standards, with places like Seattle boasting minimum wages more than \$21 per hour. These higher rates make life easier for minimum-wage workers in these areas but are still not a living wage in any of the areas where they are in effect.

Improving labor standards for low-wage workers benefits workers of all wages. A study from the National Employment Law Project found wages for union members in states with minimum wages above the federal rate increased more than three times faster than for union members in states stuck with the federal minimum wage. The study also found union membership grew by 18 percent between 2011 and 2021 in states with a minimum wage of \$15 per hour or higher while it decreased by 3.5 percent in states with the federal minimum wage. Minimum wage increases could have contributed to these gains, but they are probably the result of other pro-worker policies more likely to exist in states that raise minimum wages.

To grow the labor movement, unions must raise the floor for the most exploited workers among us. And to avoid another period where congressional gridlock and corporate interests lead to wage stagnation, wages should be automatically increased each year to at least match the rate of inflation.

Minimum wage increases in states across the U.S.



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OFFICE AND PROFESSIONAL EMPLOYEES  
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