



Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy Principles for Supporting Workers' Rights to Organize

The mission of the Virginia Interfaith Center for Public Policy (VICPP) is to engage people of faith and good will in advocating economic, racial, and social justice in Virginia's policies and practices. VICPP seeks a Commonwealth in which all people and families can thrive and share in the Commonwealth's prosperity. Given the wide economic and racial disparities in the state, VICPP must work on multiple levels to raise family incomes and wealth, build a robust social safety net, and reduce racial disparities due to past and current racist policies.

Raising wages and increasing benefits, especially for workers in low-paid jobs, is critical to lifting families out of poverty. As the United Way ALICE reports have shown, increasingly families living in poverty have family members who work but their wages and benefits are so low that they cannot make ends meet, let alone thrive. VICPP has sought to help these workers. VICPP:

- Led the faith engagement in increasing the state minimum wage (in 2020).
- Led efforts to reduce and curb wage theft (passed six bills in 2018-2020).
- Organized a Paid Sick Day coalition to advocate paid sick days for 1.2 million workers. Thus far the coalition has won paid sick days for 30,000 homecare workers. (2021)
- Organized a statewide Living Wage Program to honor and recognize employers that pay living wages.

One of the most effective ways for workers to raise wages and benefits is to organize a union and negotiate a collective bargaining agreement. Union employees make an average of 13.2 percent more than non-union workers with similar experiences and jobs. (Source: Economic Policy Institute) Ninety-two percent of union workers have job-related health coverage versus 68 percent of non-union workers. And union workers are more likely to have guaranteed pensions than non-union workers. (Source: AFL-CIO)

The union benefit is even more striking for women and people of color. Women workers who are union members earn nearly \$9000 a year more than their non-union counterparts. For African American workers, the union differential is also about \$9000 and for Latino workers the yearly differential is more than \$11,000. (Source: SEIU) Unions help reduce racial and gender disparities. Unions not only raise wages for the companies that are directly unionized, but when unions control an entire sector, wages and benefits are raised for the entire sector.

Unfortunately, it is difficult for workers to organize unions. Too many companies resist unions by illegally firing workers who lead organizing efforts, hiring high-priced union busting law firms to lead anti-union campaigns, threatening workers, and dragging out negotiations. Employers spend roughly \$340 million annually on "union avoidance" consultants that guide employers in thwarting organizing efforts. In 2016-2017, employers were charged with violating federal law in 41.5 percent of all National Labor Relations Board supervised union elections. In those elections, approximately one-fifth of employers illegally fired workers, almost one-third coerced, threatened or retaliated against workers for supporting a union, and nearly a third illegally disciplining workers for supporting a union. (Source: Economic Policy Institute) Although illegal, these anti-union efforts are often successful.

Even once workers vote to be represented by a union, it is often difficult to get a first contract. According to Todd Vachon, Director of the Rutgers Labor Education Action Research Network, “the union’s chances of settling its first contract within one year are less than 50 percent.” By stalling and delaying, anti-union employers anticipate that many workers will become discouraged and give up on their desire to have a union and a contract.

The United States has some of the weakest labor protections of any industrialized nation in the world. Consequently, the faith community can play an important role in leveling the playing field so that workers can organize and get a first contract if they wish.

Most faith communities support the rights of workers to organize unions and decry company efforts to harass, fire and intimidate workers. Faith statements also support living wages. See the accompanying document on What Faith Groups Say about Worker Justice.

Less than five percent of Virginia’s workers are represented by unions. This is half the national average, which is closer to 10 percent. West Virginia and Maryland have significantly larger percentages of workers in unions (13.1 percent and 10.7 percent respectively) and North Carolina has fewer (2.6 percent). (Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics). Virginia was one of the first states to pass a “right-to-work” law (in 1947) that prohibits unions from requiring workers they represent to pay dues. Such “right-to-work” laws have been promoted by employer groups as vehicles to limit the power of unions.

Given the importance of unions to lifting workers and their families out of poverty, faith traditions’ commitments to workers’ rights to organize, and the influential role the faith communities can play in assuring that workers can organize without such illegal and unethical behavior, VICPP will selectively, and as able given capacity, support the rights of workers to organize. VICPP will not tell workers that they “should” have a union, but rather will tell them they have the right to have one, free from harassment and intimidation, and negotiate a contract in a timely manner.

VICPP will:

- Share with workers the faith communities’ support for their right to organize without ever telling workers that they must have a union.
- Encourage companies’ and institutions’ managers to recognize workers’ rights to organize and to engage in good faith collective bargaining.
- Challenge and condemn anti-union efforts that harass or intimidate workers.
- Support efforts to ensure a smooth process for workers deciding on unions and engaging in collective bargaining.
- Reach out to community leaders as appropriate to encourage conversations with workers.

VICPP will not:

- Demonize company leadership or management.
- Undertake actions to support workers that have not been vetted/approved by workers or their representatives.

Approved by VICPP Board of Directors on December 8, 2022.