

A Workers First Agenda for North Carolina



2021-2022 Legislative Session

The NC State AFL-CIO and our affiliated unions are unwavering in our commitment to a more just society for all working people. The COVID-19 pandemic has left hundreds of thousands of people dead and many more struggling to make ends meet. In this unprecedented, challenging time, workers have kept this country running. From nurses, grocery clerks, and bus drivers to postal workers and many others, millions of working people have risked their lives every day to make sure that our essential needs are met. Our priority is ensuring that working people receive adequate resources to survive the pandemic. Ultimately, however, we want working families to do more than just survive. Beyond the pandemic, we want working people to be able to thrive, to build better lives for themselves and their children, to enjoy the fruits of their labor, and to live with dignity. It is time for policymakers to recognize the significant contributions and sacrifices made by working people. It is time to put workers first, just as they have done for all of us during this unprecedented crisis.

COVID Safety & Relief

1. Keep workers safe:

- Require the NC Department of Labor (NCDOL) to respond to COVID-related complaints about unsafe working conditions and conduct regular inspections to protect workers. NCDOL should require employers to follow CDC Guidelines for COVID. Ensure that the NCDOL has the resources necessary to fulfill these objectives.
- Ensure safe and adequate housing for migrant farmworkers by requiring migrant housing to provide bathrooms with plumbing (rather than outhouses), privacy barriers between toilets and showers, high-speed internet access, washing machines, and at least six feet of space between beds. Provide emergency funding to assist agricultural employers with compliance where needed.
- Eliminate the administrative investigation requirement of the Retaliatory Employment Discrimination Act (REDA), which currently requires workers to file an agency complaint and receive a right to sue letter prior to filing a retaliation lawsuit. Given retaliation concerns during COVID and limited agency resources, NCDOL should support the elimination of the administrative exhaustion requirement.
- Maintain a stable workers' compensation system that pays adequate benefits to individuals who are injured or sickened on the job. Implement a rebuttable presumption that essential workers who contract COVID contracted the infection on the job. Increase the maximum allowable compensation for permanent injury to all or any part of any important external or internal organ or body part, such as the heart, lungs, and brain. Create certain cancer presumptions for firefighters injured in the line of duty.
- Guarantee a minimum number of paid sick days for workers to care for themselves and their loved ones.

COVID Safety & Relief

- Expand Medicaid and take action to lower the cost of prescription drugs so that more North Carolinians have access to needed care during the current public health crisis and beyond.
- Require employers to provide all employees with a 30-minute work break during any six consecutive hours worked. Currently, the law does not require workers to be given any work breaks no matter how many hours worked.

2. Help the jobless and our economy by restoring fairness and adequacy to our unemployment insurance system:

- Increase the maximum duration for receiving unemployment benefits from 12-16 weeks to 26 weeks, which is in line with the vast majority of states.
- Increase the weekly benefits amount by adopting a formula that uses the highest quarter wages, or the average of the two highest quarters, rather than the current formula, which no other state uses.
- Increase the maximum weekly benefit amount from \$350, which is one of the lowest maximum benefit amounts in the country. Index the maximum weekly benefit amount to the state's wage growth.
- Increase the Earnings Allowance/Disregard so that more part-time workers can qualify for benefits.
- Establish a work-sharing option for employers to give workers and employers more flexibility when faced with layoffs.
- Repeal waiting weeks for benefits.
- End the recouping of benefit overpayments for claimants who are not at fault in creating the overpayment.

Beyond COVID: An Economy that Works for All

3. Raise wages and increase the standard of living for all workers—whether white, Black or brown:

- Raise the state minimum wage to \$15 an hour and tie the minimum wage to inflation. Eliminate the exemption of domestic and agricultural workers from minimum wage laws. Eliminate the tipped wage.
- Add public school employees to the list of state employees who are entitled to a minimum wage of \$15 an hour.
- Enhance our laws to prohibit employers from misclassifying workers as independent contractors, which is often done by employers seeking to evade legal and tax obligations. Create a joint employer standard that reflects modern workplace arrangements and holds employers, like those using subcontracting arrangements, responsible to employees for compliance with worker protection laws.
- Empower municipalities to raise the minimum wage and other labor standards in their communities, particularly for contractors working for municipalities.
- Reinstate the state Earned Income Tax Credit.

Beyond COVID: An Economy that Works for All

4. Invest in the creation and retention of good jobs that pay family-sustaining wages:

- Require employers that receive tax incentives to provide jobs that will raise, not lower, the standard of living of working families.
- Expand the film and television industry by restoring the rebate program and including infrastructure development allowing for competitive growth and expanding the middle class.
- Make employers that relocate call centers overseas ineligible for state subsidies and require that call center work contracted by or for state agencies be performed within our state.
- Focus workforce development efforts on training that will enable workers to move into good-paying jobs. Expand registered apprenticeship programs while maintaining rigorous apprenticeship standards.
- Invest in offshore wind production and require wage standards and local hiring practices for related jobs.
- Grant municipalities more power over the procurement process for construction projects to create more regulation around safety, wages, and to encourage local hiring when public funding is used.

5. Eliminate barriers that prevent workers from accessing good jobs:

- Reduce barriers to employment for formerly incarcerated individuals. Enact “ban the box” laws prohibiting employers from inquiring into an individual’s criminal history.
- Expand broadband access in rural communities.
- Provide childcare subsidies to offset costs of affordable, quality childcare for low-income workers and those pursuing education and training.
- Ensure low-wage workers have the flexibility to pursue better opportunities and higher pay by prohibiting non-compete agreements and anti-poaching policies in low-wage industries.

6. Protect workers’ freedom to join together in unions to improve their working conditions:

- Repeal General Statute §95-98 so that public employers and employees have the freedom to negotiate and enter into collective bargaining agreements.
- Repeal the “right-to-work” law, which makes it harder for working people to form a union and collectively negotiate for better working conditions.
- Repeal Section 20.5 of the Farm Act of 2017, which discriminates against farm workers by stripping basic rights to organize and has cost the state significant resources to defend in ongoing litigation.

Beyond COVID: A Democracy for All

7. Ensure all citizens have a voice in our democracy:

- Ensure every person can exercise their right to vote by expanding access to voter registration, vote by mail, and combating voter suppression which often targets communities of color.
- Reinstate public campaign financing so that working people, including our own members, can run for office.
- Establish an Independent Redistricting Commission to draw legislative and congressional boundaries and put an end to the gerrymandering that undermines the will of our citizens.
- Protect the right of citizens to engage in peaceful protest free from intimidation, illegal use of force, criminalization of protesting, and other means intended to undermine free public expression.

8. Address systemic racism in our criminal justice system and other institutions:

- End the unjust cash bail system, excessive court fees, and debtor's prisons.
- Restore the North Carolina Racial Justice Act, which allows capital defendants to challenge their death sentences if race was a significant factor in seeking or imposing the death penalty at the time of trial.

Who We Are

The North Carolina State American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (NC State AFL-CIO) is the largest association of unions of working people in North Carolina. We represent over a hundred thousand members who work together for good jobs, safe workplaces, workers' rights, consumer protections, and quality public services on behalf of ALL working people.

We are a democratic organization governed by a constitution and accountable to our membership, which elects our leadership – one full-time president and an executive board representative of unions of working people across North Carolina.

Since our founding in 1957, our mission has been to win victories for North Carolina working families--inside and outside the workplace--by growing our movement; engaging and mobilizing our leaders, members, and allies; and building independent political power for working people.

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