



Workers' Newest Allies in State and Federal Government (Part 5 of Series)

Building momentum for strengthening workers' rights in the Keystone State

In 1932, Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis famously asserted the now-popular idea that states function as “laboratories of democracy” because of their social, economic, racial and geographic diversity. Further, Brandeis suggested that “a state may, if its citizens choose, serve as a laboratory; and try novel social and economic experiments without risk to the rest of the country.”

Nearly a century later, state lawmakers from all political persuasions continue to use the phrase to suggest that states are the best place for innovation and that their policy proposals are applicable nationwide.

This rationale reaffirms our strong belief that workers should be as watchful of their local and state lawmakers as they are of those in Washington, D.C.

In recent weeks, a number of our newly elected allies in Pennsylvania are demonstrating the unique powers state lawmakers can wield on behalf of workers and our families.

In February, we [lifted up](#) a team of Steelworkers whose efforts helped secure victories in three special elections, which flipped the balance of power in Pennsylvania’s state house and cemented the first worker-friendly majority in the chamber in nearly 15 years.

The new majority wasted no time passing a slate of bills in early May. The legislation seeks to protect workers’ health and safety, establish workers’ rights in the state constitution and more.

The slate of bills includes:

- House Bill 950, which guarantees workers’ rights to organize and collectively bargain in Pennsylvania;
- House Bill 299, which extends Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) protections to Pennsylvania’s public sector workers;
- House Bill 930, which extends benefits to workers who suffer serious and permanent disfigurement of the body below the neck;
- House Bill 413, which makes it harder for employers to circumvent union-negotiated work rules by misclassifying workers in the construction industry; and,
- House Bill 760, which ensures workers can receive workers’ compensation payments directly deposited into their bank account.

Unfortunately, these bills face an uphill battle in the state senate, which is still controlled by a slim, 28-22 anti-worker majority.

Since 2016, our number of pro-worker allies in the chamber has continued to grow with each election. Many believe that 2024 is our best opportunity to flip the chamber, securing a union-friendly trifecta (as we recently highlighted in [Michigan](#)), and greatly increasing the chances for reforms such as those mentioned above to get to the governor's desk and become law.

State-Level Rollbacks of Child Labor Laws a Growing Concern Nationwide

The alarming number of states rolling back child labor laws further emphasizes the need for worker-led electoral campaigns and pro-worker policymaking.

In February, USW International President Tom Conway [wrote](#) about this trend, highlighting a new bill that has been passed by both chambers of Iowa's state legislature and is currently awaiting the signature of Governor Kim Reynolds.

Unfortunately, this law allowing 14-year-olds to work in industrial freezers, meatpacking plants and industrial laundry operations, is not unique.

As documented in a recent [story](#) by the watchdog group *More Perfect Union*, lawmakers in nearly a dozen states are working on or have already passed legislation rolling back child labor protections.

Some examples include:

- **Arkansas:** Governor Sarah Huckabee Sanders recently signed a new law eliminating age verification and removing the requirement for minors to obtain their parent/guardian's permission to be employed.
- **Minnesota:** Lawmakers have proposed lifting prohibitions that currently keep children from performing certain types of hazardous work or working for extended hours.
- **Nebraska:** Some lawmakers are supporting the creation of a "subminimum" wage for young workers.
- **New Hampshire:** A law was recently enacted that expands work hours and lowers the age to bus tables where alcohol is served.
- **New Jersey:** A new law expands working hours for teens from 40 hours to 50 hours per week.
- **Ohio:** The state senate has passed legislation extending work hours for minors.
- **Wisconsin:** Legislation extending work hours for youths was passed in the state house and senate, but was later vetoed by Governor Evers.

More Perfect Union also indicated that child labor violations are up 37% since last year.

Who we elect matters because our representatives hold the power to decide whether our states are laboratories for enhanced workers' rights or unfettered worker exploitation.

Did You Know...

May is Mental Health Awareness Month and includes Women's Health Week (May 14 to 20) and National Nurses Week (May 6 to 12).

May is all about health! The U.S. Department of Labor launched its "Mental Health at Work" initiative for the month of May and is hoping to raise awareness of valuable information for workers and employers. This initiative will increase awareness of the importance of mental health well-being within the workplace.

[Click here](#) to check out the DOL's new webpage promoting mental health tools and resources for the workplace.

While workplace stress and poor job quality can negatively affect workers' mental health, workplaces can also provide important connections to resources, supports, accommodations and benefits designed to improve our mental health and help with access to treatment. Many of our local unions have bargained Employee Assistance Programs with their employers. These vary by workplace, so check with your employer or local union for specifics.

Our recent membership surveys show that one of the top three issues of concern is our health care. It is vital to remember that overall health care includes mental health as well.

Please also read and share with friends and co-workers OSHA's new [Workplace Stress toolkit](#). Starting this month, let awareness lead to actions that make permanent and positive changes to workplaces nationwide.

Help get the word out about Election Connection!

Forward this [LINK](#) to your fellow Steelworkers and family so they can sign up to receive our monthly newsletter.

Do you have an idea for a future issue of Election Connection? Email Eric Russell at erussell@usw.org.