

The North Carolina Workers' Bill of Rights

Over the last few years, the North Carolina Justice Center's Workers' Rights Project has asked workers across the state to imagine what laws they would pass to make North Carolina better for workers and, by extension, businesses, if they were in power. Their ideas form the basis of a WORKERS' BILL OF RIGHTS.

Legislation that could make up this Workers' Bill of Rights already has been introduced at the NC General Assembly this session. Without much fanfare, and without much hope of passing, bills have been put forward that present the members of the General Assembly with an opportunity to move us closer to recognizing the contributions and dignity of the 4.7 million workers in the state. A real Workers' Bill of Rights would include:

THE RIGHT TO BE PAID FOR THE WORK YOU DO. Wage theft occurs when workers are underpaid or not paid at all for their work, and it happens every day in North Carolina. House Bill 826 would make it easier for workers to bring complaints when employers cheat them out of wages and would hold unscrupulous employers accountable through increased penalties. This would go a long way in curbing this crime wave.

THE RIGHT TO A LIVING WAGE. Working full-time, year-round should be enough to keep a worker out of poverty. But a full-time minimum-wage worker in North Carolina earns about \$3,000 less per year than the federal poverty threshold for a family of three. While food and energy costs continue to rise, the current minimum wage of \$7.25 just isn't enough to make ends meet. House Bill 115 and Senate Bill 220 would adjust the minimum wage based on increases in the cost of living. This would be an important first step in making sure that hard work pays off and ensuring that workers earn enough to fuel job and economic growth in their local communities.

THE RIGHT TO EQUAL PAY. Women in North Carolina are paid \$7,000 per year less than men -- simply for being women. A recent study showed women in our state are more likely than men to work in managerial and professional occupations and have higher levels of education than men but still are paid less. Isn't it time to ensure that all North Carolina employees, women and men, are paid the same wages for the same work? House Bill 603 would do just that.

THE RIGHT TO A SAFE WORKPLACE. Federal and state law are supposed to protect workers from serious harm on the job, but the lack of enforcement and the low fines for violations lead many employers to sacrifice safety in order to save money. House Bill 906 would improve workplace safety by requiring anyone bidding on a public construction contract to be pre-qualified based on their compliance with occupational safety and health laws.

THE RIGHT TO CARE FOR YOUR HEALTH AND YOUR FAMILY WITHOUT LOSING PAY OR YOUR JOB. For many workers, losing a day's pay is as easy as catching a cold. Taking a child or grandchild to a doctor's appointment, recovering from an illness, or spending time to bond with a newborn child -- these are ubiquitous life events that shouldn't put a worker's job or a family's economic security at risk. All workers need earned paid sick time (House Bill 100 and Senate Bill 536) and access to job protections under the federal Family Medical Leave Act when the need to take a longer period of leave arises (House Bill 99 and Senate Bill 535).

THE RIGHT TO A SECOND CHANCE. The successful reentry into society of those with criminal records is crucial for community safety and state resources, and it is especially important for those who have already paid their debts. Every type of criminal record -- from dismissed charges to felony convictions -- triggers a multitude of civil and social disabilities known as "collateral consequences." House Bill 425 would create a "Ban the Box" policy for public employment, delaying a criminal record request until a conditional job offer is made in order to ensure an applicant's criminal record is only one consideration in his hiring.

THE RIGHT TO BE FREE FROM DISCRIMINATION IN HIRING, PAY, OR PROMOTIONS. Most employees are already protected from certain kinds of discrimination in the workplace, including discrimination on the basis of age, race, sex, disability and several other characteristics. But if we believe as a state that workers really have the right to work in an environment free of discrimination, then our laws need to be updated to include sexual orientation and gender identity among the protected categories (House Bill 429/Senate Bill 544 and House Bill 647). Workers have the right to be evaluated based on their experience, skills, and ability to do a job and should not be turned down because they are unemployed (House bill 737) or because of their credit history (House Bill 815).

The bills that together form the Workers Bill of Rights would help working families while helping local businesses and the economy -- by putting money into the pockets of those most likely to spend in their communities, by establishing a loyal and productive workforce, and by ensuring the economic security and dignity of all working families in North Carolina. **IT'S NOT TOO LATE.**