
19,000 Virginia workers would take a pay cut if right-to-work law is repealed

AVERAGE PRIVATE SECTOR UNION DUES IN VIRGINIA ARE \$750 A YEAR

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The freedom to spend your money as you wish, and not to spend it to advance causes or organizations you oppose, is under assault in Virginia as political leaders attempt to repeal or weaken the Commonwealth's right-to-work law.

If these efforts succeed, thousands of Virginians will be required to pay union dues or agency fees to unions they do not support. These working families would instantly see a pay cut.

And the cost is considerable: Private sector union dues average \$750 per year in Virginia. Unions also frequently fund advocacy and political activism with which many of their members disagree.

WHAT ARE RIGHT-TO-WORK PROTECTIONS?

“Right to work” simply means a union cannot get a worker fired for not helping to finance the union. It does not affect a union’s ability to bargain in any other way. The ability of workers and unions to negotiate with employers over wages, hours, benefits or anything else will not change by repealing right to work. The only difference will be that if the law is repealed, Virginians must pay unions regardless of whether they agree with them and think they are doing a good job.

AROUND 19,000 VIRGINIANS WOULD BE FORCED TO PAY HUNDREDS OF DOLLARS IN DUES OR FEES

Repealing right to work would result in an immediate pay cut for many working Virginians. Around 19,000 Virginians working in the private sector who are not currently dues-paying members of a union will be forced to pay up in order to keep their jobs, with dues in Virginia private sector unions averaging \$749.28 per year.

Even without right-to-work protections, no one can be forced to join a union. But repealing those protections would force nonmembers to pay so-called “agency” or “fair share” fees, which typically

constitute most of the full dues amount. If these workers paid the full cost of dues, it would send an additional \$14.5 million to Virginia labor unions from workers' paychecks.

An annual \$750 outlay is a significant expense for many households. That \$750 would cover more than two months' worth of groceries for the average household.¹ And when put toward a purpose opposed by those whose money is being spent, that \$750 is more than just a cost – it is an affront.

Nationally, labor unions spent over \$2 billion on politics in 2018,² or about \$136 per dues-paying union member.³ Put another way, labor unions spent almost as much on politics in 2018 (a non-presidential year) as did all major party congressional nominees combined. Democratic and Republican nominees for the U.S. House of Representatives spent a total of \$1.32 billion in 2018, while U.S. Senate nominees spent \$863 million, for a combined total of \$2.19 billion.⁴ Meanwhile, unions spent \$2.01 billion on political activities that year, a significant portion of it contrary to the beliefs and convictions of the workers from whom that money derived.⁵ While unions are quick to point out that agency fees do not include political spending, money is fungible and even fees may still fund activities that nonmembers do not support.

RIGHT TO WORK IN VIRGINIA: BIPARTISAN SUPPORT AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

In right-to-work Virginia, all workers are free to join a union and advance its aims, whether those aims are focused on the workplace, Richmond or the halls of Congress. But no one is required to fund these efforts against their will. The repeal of Virginia's right-to-work law would strip that freedom, hit workers' pocketbooks and, in some cases, attack their core principles. But the economic impact of repealing right-to-work laws is much larger than that, because freedom of employment promotes economic growth.

After-tax income per household is more than \$13,000 higher in Virginia than in the average non-right-to-work state, with many businesses looking exclusively to right-to-work states when looking to expand.⁶

Until recently, this was bipartisan orthodoxy in Virginia. During his 2013 gubernatorial campaign, Democratic candidate and former chair of the Democratic National Committee Terry McAuliffe celebrated Virginia's status as "a great right-to-work state," adding, "We should never change that. It helps us do what we need to do to grow our businesses here in Virginia."⁷ The previous Democratic gubernatorial nominee thought the same way. In 2009, state Sen. Creigh Deeds, D-Bath, observed that "there's no question the right-to-work law has brought jobs to Virginia."⁸

It is not just the jobs or household incomes or even the amount of the union dues paid under protest that should be a concern for Virginians. Equally if not more important is the freedom of every worker to decide for herself whether she wants to be a dues-paying union member.

This is something that even some union leaders have historically supported. Samuel Gompers, the first and longest-serving president of the American Federation of Labor, was against forcing

workers into unions against their will, stating, “There may be here and there a worker who for certain reasons unexplainable to us does not join a union of labor. This is his right, no matter how morally wrong he may be. It is his legal right, and no one can or dare question his exercise of that legal right.”⁹

Decades later Gary Casteel, then the UAW’s regional director for Southern states and later its secretary-treasurer, told the Washington Post, “This is something I’ve never understood, that people think right to work hurts unions ... To me, it helps them. You don’t have to belong if you don’t want to. So if I go to an organizing drive, I can tell these workers, ‘If you don’t like this arrangement, you don’t have to belong.’ Versus, ‘If we get 50 percent of you, then all of you have to belong, whether you like to or not.’ I don’t even like the way that sounds, because it’s a voluntary system, and if you don’t think the system’s earning its keep, then you don’t have to pay.”¹⁰

Virginians are free to join and participate in a union. That is their choice, and it is one made by nearly 100,000 private sector workers in the Commonwealth of Virginia.¹¹ But the decision not to join and pay dues to a union is equally a worker’s choice. Abridging that freedom undermines the rights of all Virginians. And it comes at a steep cost, both financial and political, for many Virginia workers.

Virginia Works is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit education organization dedicated to empowering Commonwealth families with data-driven research on the most important economic issues facing our state.

METHODOLOGY

In 2018, the most recent year for which data are available, 213,206 Virginians were employed in unionized workforces, of which 167,784 were members of a union. Of these, 117,764 were covered by private sector unions, with 98,354 dues-paying private sector union members, leaving 19,410 nonmembers, most of which would likely be obligated to pay union dues or fees were Virginia’s right-to-work law repealed.¹²

Average dues per union member in Virginia were calculated based on the filings of the 10 largest private sector union locals in Virginia, representing more than 25% of all union members in the Commonwealth,¹³ with dues weighted by membership. Within this sample, the average of total local and national dues paid was \$749.28 and the median was \$728.46.

Dues payment data for Virginia’s 10 largest private sector unions were derived from the unions’ LM-2s, an annual form filed with the U.S. Department of Labor detailing unions’ financial and membership data. For each union, the most recently available filing as of Jan. 15, 2020 was used. Total union membership and covered employee data for Virginia were derived from the Union Membership and Coverage Database, maintained by Barry Hirsch of the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University and David Macpherson at the Department of Economics at Trinity University.¹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ U.S. Bureau of Economic Analysis, “Consumer Expenditures—2018,” Sept. 10, 2019, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cesan.nr0.htm>.

² National Institute for Labor Relations Research, “Biggest Special Interest: Big Labor Spent \$2 Billion on Politics,” April 23, 2019, <https://nilrr.org/files/NILRR-Big-Labor-Politics-2018-election-cycle-published.pdf>.

³ Based on union membership figures as reported for 2018 by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Union Membership (Annual),” Jan. 18, 2019, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/union2_01182019.htm.

⁴ OpenSecrets.org, “Stats at a Glance” (2018), Center for Responsive Politics, <https://www.opensecrets.org/overview/index.php?cycle=2018&display=T&type=G>.

⁵ Over 85% of union political spending typically goes to Democrats but about a third of union members typically vote Republican. See Alex Leary and Kris Maher “Democrats Labor to Stem Flow of Union Voters to Trump.” *The Wall Street Journal*, Sept. 2, 2019 <https://www.wsj.com/articles/democrats-labor-to-stem-flow-of-union-voters-to-trump-11567422002> and OpenSecrets.org, “Labor: Top Contributors to Federal Candidates, Parties, and Outside Groups,” Center for Responsive Politics, <https://www.opensecrets.org/industries/contrib.php?ind=P&Bkdn=DemRep&cycle=2018>

⁶ Mark Mix, “Right to Work Has Been Good for Virginia. Let’s Keep it That Way,” *The (Fredericksburg) Free-Lance Star* (op-ed), Sept. 5, 2019, https://www.fredericksburg.com/opinion/commentary-right-to-work-has-been-good-for-virginia-let/article_7d87f68e-794e-55d3-b663-3e5b50506b9c.html.

⁷ “McAuliffe’s Dilemma,” Editorial, *The Washington Times*, June 21, 2013, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/jun/21/mcauliffes-dilemma/>.

⁸ “Deeds Supports Right-to-Work Law,” *The Washington Times*, July 3, 2009, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jul/3/deeds-supports-right-to-work-law/>.

⁹ Gompers remarks to the U.S. Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, “Hearings before the Subcommittee on Education of the Committee on Labor and Public Welfare, United States Senate, Eighty-Ninth Congress, First Session on S. 289,” May 4, 1965, <http://bit.ly/2RXhsX1>

¹⁰ Lydia DePillis, “Why Harris v. Quinn isn’t as bad for workers as it sounds,” *Washington Post*, July 1, 2014, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2014/07/01/why-harris-v-quinn-isnt-as-bad-for-workers-as-it-sounds/>

¹¹ As of 2018, there were 98,354 dues-paying private sector union members in Virginia, although about 1,200 of them worked in industries governed by the Railway Labor Act or other federal statutes which deny employees the protection of state right-to-work laws.

¹² Barry Hirsch and David Macpherson, “Union Membership and Coverage Database from the CPS,” Unionstats.org, 2018 CPS update (Feb. 4, 2019). These number may include some workers under the Railway Labor Act that would not be affected by a change in the law.

¹³ U.S. Department of Labor, Office of Labor-Management Standards (OLMS), LM-2 data, <https://www.dol.gov/olms/regs/compliance/rilo/lmrda.htm>.

¹⁴ Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson, “Union Membership and Coverage Database from the Current Population Survey: Note,” *Industrial and Labor Relations Review*, Vol. 56, No. 2, January 2003, 349-54.