

OUR DAILY BREAD



**CAROLINA
FORWARD**

**THE HOURLY
WORKERS PACKAGE**

*BUILDING AN ECONOMY THAT
WORKS FOR US ALL*

OUR DAILY BREAD

The Hourly Workers Package: *Building a North Carolina economy that works for us all*

| | |
|--------------------------------|----|
| Executive summary | 3 |
| Introduction | 5 |
| 1 - Raise the Wage | 11 |
| 2 - End Wage Theft | 15 |
| 3 - Fair Scheduling and Leave | 18 |
| 4 - Fix Unemployment Insurance | 22 |
| 5 - Unlock Worker Mobility | 25 |
| 6 - Strengthen Worker Voices | 28 |
| Eight Hours for What We Will | 30 |
| Endnotes | 33 |
| Acknowledgements | 34 |



"Without labor, nothing prospers."

Sophocles

"The indignities imposed on so many low-wage workers - the drug tests, the constant surveillance, being 'reamed out' by managers - are part of what keeps wages low. If you're made to feel unworthy enough, you may come to think that what you're paid is what you are actually worth."

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Nickel and Dimed*

"They got money for war, but can't feed the poor."

Tupac Shakur



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As North Carolina looks beyond the COVID pandemic, it faces a number of big, fundamental choices for its economic future. The uneven and unequally shared post-2008 recovery is a cautionary tale. Then, far too much of the post-crash growth wound up making the comfortable and affluent even more so, without really changing the economic fortunes of the bottom half - or, worse, pulling up the ladder of opportunity even higher out of reach.

Today, nearly half of North Carolina’s workers are hourly workers, most of them earning very low wages. The COVID pandemic wiped out hundreds of thousands of hourly jobs, leaving behind not just a path of illness and death, but economic dislocation too.

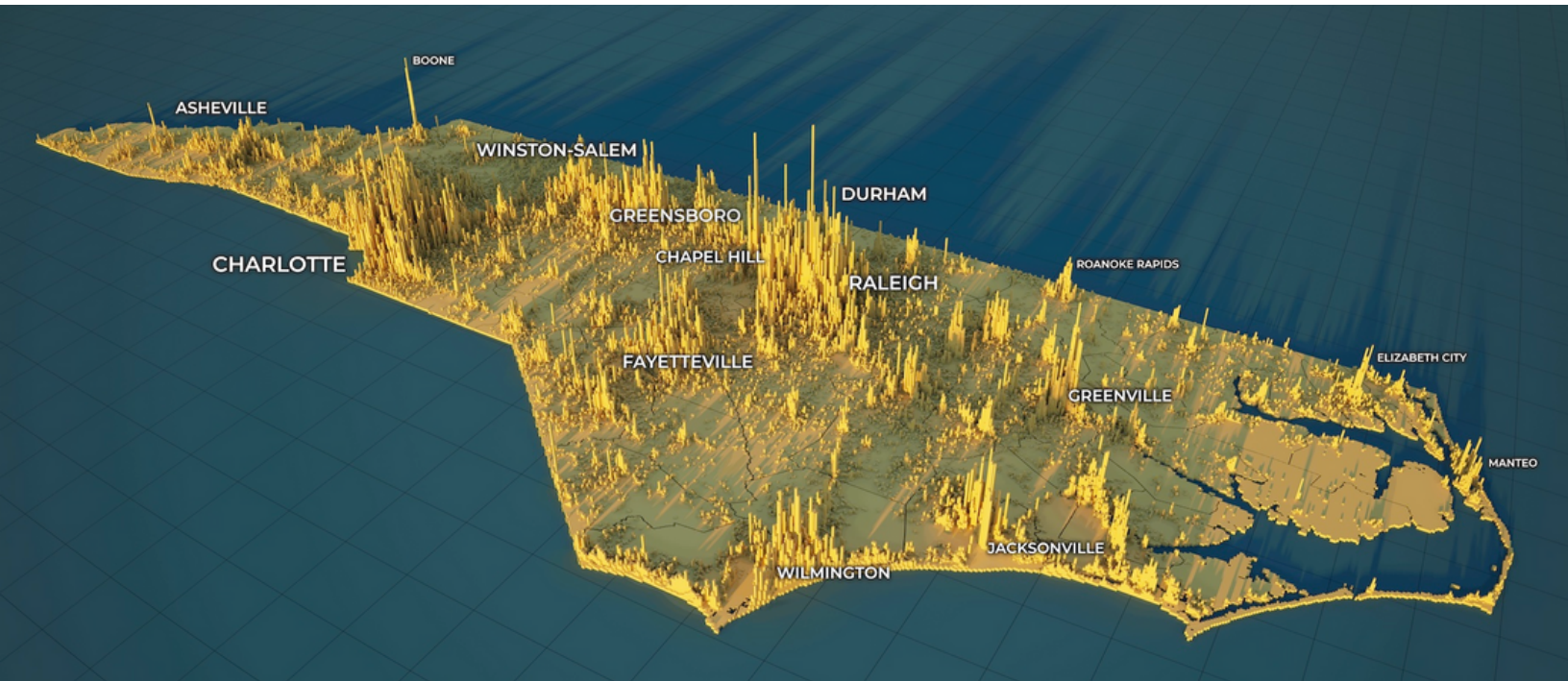
Emerging from the global pandemic, we now face a period of potentially significant economic expansion.

North Carolina’s leaders have a chance to seize this unique opportunity to do something truly historic in our state: to put workers first in line to enjoy the fruits of economic growth.

To do this, we propose **six specific policy areas** where state leaders can have a tremendous positive impact on the economic future for the state’s hourly workers.



These range from raising wages and safeguarding them from unscrupulous employers, to instituting rules to give those hourly workers greater control and predictability in their lives. It includes strengthening the safety net for workers who temporarily lose their jobs and protecting workers' rights not only to freely move jobs, but to bargain collectively with their employers.



North Carolina's economy has been dominated by low-wage, hourly, and politically powerless labor for generations. Entrenched big business interests have been highly successful in steering the political agenda during that time, in close cooperation with leadership from both parties. The old, traditional approaches, lurching between austerity, trickle-down economics and wishful thinking, have always left our state's hourly workers last. It's time to reverse that order. We must harness the transformative power of strong markets and free enterprise to even the economic playing field.

Work is ennobling. In the best of cases, it can give purpose to our days and our lives. But it is, first and foremost, a matter of sustenance; a way that each person and family keeps themselves housed, fed and clothed, and hopefully, in at least some small way, can look forward to something better tomorrow. This is what a job *should* deliver: not a gamble, but some small measure of stability. A guarantee not of wealth, but of at least getting by, with the hope of another day to come. *Our daily bread.*



INTRODUCTION

In North Carolina, roughly 2.3 million out of a total labor force of 5 million people work on an hourly wage basis. Hourly workers are highly concentrated in service industries like food preparation, hospitality, leisure, retail, accommodation and healthcare. They stock our shelves, transport our goods, clean our homes and offices, care for our children and grandparents, harvest our crops, process our meat, make and deliver our food, and a thousand other things in between. It is not an exaggeration to say that much of modern society, and its myriad conveniences, are totally dependent on the labor of hourly workers.

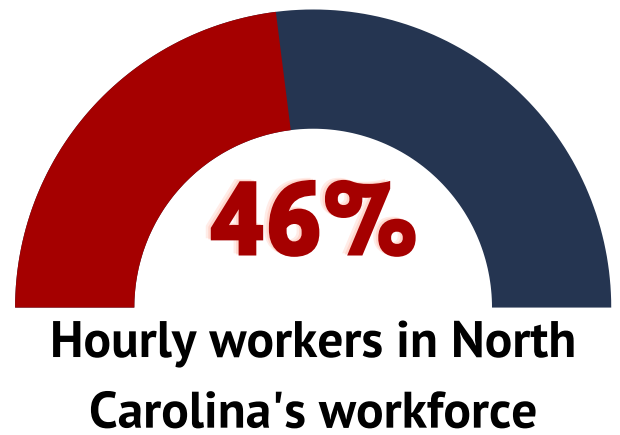


Median wages for North Carolina's hourly worker class have lagged behind the national average for generations. Not only do these workers earn lower wages, but they also enjoy less job security and predictability than salaried employees. The jobs themselves typically offer little or no upward mobility by design. Because of the nature of the work, as well as the people who perform it, hourly workers also tend to be highly vulnerable to abusive employer practices. This comes in the form of poor working conditions, non-existent benefits, long shifts with no breaks (much less paid leave),

and using highly variable “just in time” scheduling. It also comes in the form of outright wage theft, which is both common and goes largely uninvestigated.



Low-wage hourly workers are often stereotyped as young people just launching their careers, but this is totally inaccurate. Most are adults in their prime working years: approximately half are over 35, and nearly a third are over 45. Black, Latino and female workers are disproportionately likely to be in this group. More than 1 in 4 low-wage workers support children at home, and despite working, about the same proportion also receives some form of public assistance because they earn so little.¹



A Snapshot of North Carolina's Low-Wage Workforce

| | Low-wage workers as a % of local workforce | Median hourly wage | % Female | % White/Black/Latino | % over 35 |
|--------------------------|--|--------------------|----------|----------------------|-----------|
| Asheville | 47.6 | \$10.02 | 52.8 | 78.1/6.9/10.3 | 51.5 |
| CLT/Concord/Gastonia | 41.7 | \$9.94 | 54.2 | 50/30.4/14.7 | 49.4 |
| Durham-Chapel Hill | 47.4 | \$9.94 | 52.6 | 38.9/32.8/22.4 | 46.2 |
| Fayetteville | 50.7 | \$9.38 | 58.2 | 38.1/42.6/12 | 42.6 |
| Goldsboro | 53.1 | \$9.16 | 50.1 | 40.5/38.2/19 | 49.9 |
| Greensboro-High Point | 44.2 | \$9.94 | 54.3 | 50.9/30.9/11.8 | 51 |
| Hickory-Lenoir-Morganton | 47.9 | \$9.88 | 53.4 | 77.2/7.5/10.6 | 53.6 |
| Raleigh | 38.1 | \$10.18 | 52.9 | 48.2/28.4/17 | 48.7 |
| Wilmington | 46.3 | \$10.02 | 55.4 | 71.2/16.7/9.2 | 43 |
| Winston-Salem | 44 | \$9.84 | 53.3 | 57.2/23.6/15.6 | 52.3 |



Source: Brookings Institution analysis of the 2012-2016 American Community Survey

Besides being low paid, these men and women also enjoy little job security and work schedules that are often irregular and subject to last-minute change. All of this causes not just financial insecurity, but unpredictability in their lives. It makes home lives strained and childcare a constant worry, which only compounds the difficulties of meager livelihoods. This is the reality of working life for millions of our people and their families across our state; a reality that the vast majority of highly paid, white-collar workers and political elites who have actual influence over these policies have little or no visibility into, except for when they're ordering delivery.

H-2A Temporary Agricultural Visas Granted, FY 2020

| | Total visas certified | % of total |
|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| Florida | 39,064 | 14.2 |
| Georgia | 27,614 | 10 |
| Washington | 26,832 | 9.7 |
| California | 25,453 | 9.2 |
| North Carolina | 22,052 | 8 |
| Louisiana | 11,332 | 4.1 |
| Michigan | 9,912 | 3.6 |
| Arizona | 8,602 | 3.1 |
| New York | 8,482 | 3.1 |
| Kentucky | 6,952 | 2.5 |

North Carolina also has an enormous agricultural worker population - at least 150,000, depending on the season. These workers, already highly vulnerable due to lack of English language fluency and poverty, are frequently subjected to atrocious working conditions and blatant wage theft. Many are paid a piece rate (ex. per bushel basket of sweet potatoes), not a guaranteed hourly wage, and their wages are often garnished with opaque charges for room and board. North Carolina is also one of the largest importers of foreign seasonal farm labor in the United States under the H-2A visa program (22,000 in 2020 alone).²



Source: Employment and Training Administration, U.S. DOL

For a long time, political leaders in neither party have offered hourly workers very much. Due to both lobbying clout and strategic campaign contributions, large corporate employers enjoy far more influence with lawmakers than their employees do. The entrenched big business lobby has worked assiduously to cultivate both parties, as well as to build and then protect a legislative majority that reliably serves the interests of big business over workers.





Into this already unfair landscape, the COVID pandemic was an earthquake.

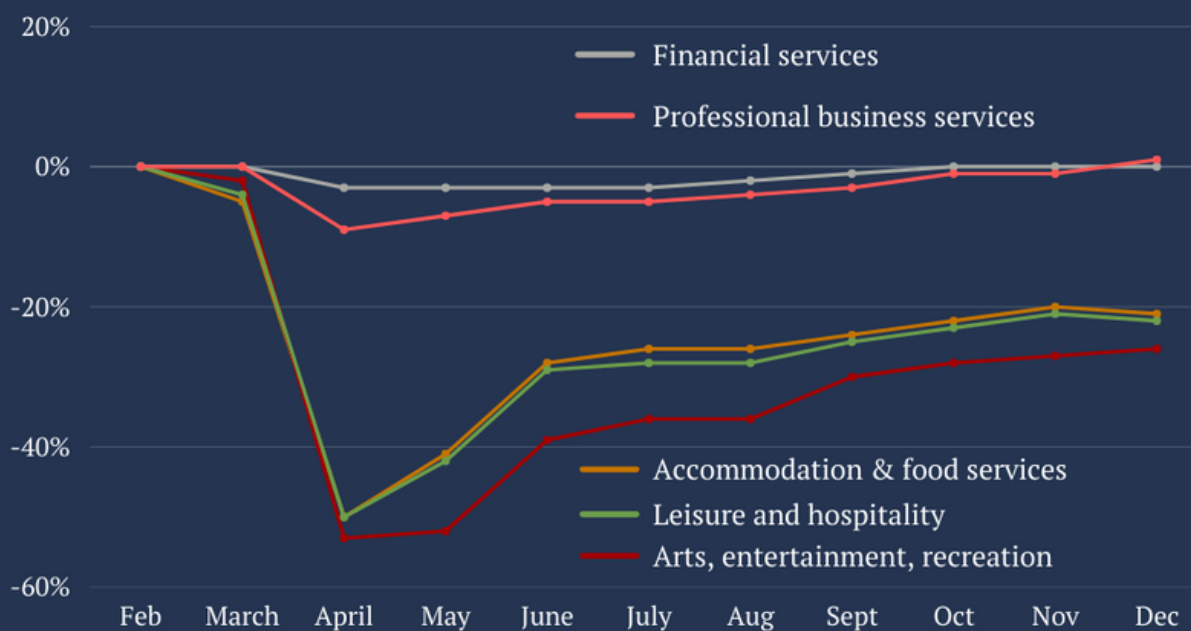
The snap recession triggered by the COVID pandemic was utterly devastating to hourly workers. While very little was known about how contagious the COVID-19 virus was or what its main modes of transmission were, fear became widespread. People stopped venturing out to eat or work, offices closed and those who could stayed at home. Consumer spending evaporated, demand collapsed, and within just a few weeks, hundreds of thousands were out of work.

Yet life went on, even during a deadly, once-in-a-century global pandemic. Supply chains kept running; deliveries were made; chickens and hogs were processed; grocery shelves mostly remained full (except for toilet paper). The people who performed this labor became temporarily known not as “hourly” or “low-wage” or “low-skill” workers, but as “essential.”

Because that is what they are: **essential**. Without those workers stocking shelves, making deliveries or processing poultry in unsafe conditions for poverty wages, everything stops. For a brief, fleeting moment, our hourly workers became “heroes.”



Percent Change From Pre-COVID Employment (2020)



The economic carnage from COVID in North Carolina was swift and deep.

Source: Patrick McHugh, NC Justice Center, 2021; Bureau of Labor Statistics. See endnote 3.

In April of 2020, our state lost over half a million jobs. While that number rebounded quickly, the improvement was, and has continued to be, bifurcated. High-wage, salaried jobs in fields like professional and financial services have not only come back, but have added *net new jobs* since pre-COVID. By contrast, low-wage, hourly jobs, such as those in leisure, hospitality and entertainment are far below where they were. In all, North Carolina still has a deficit of around 150,000 jobs that have not rematerialized since COVID - a deep hole that is not proportionately shared across the state.

In 2021, economic growth is booming. The federal government, under President Biden and a Democratic Congress, has rejected austerity and is investing again in families, workers and infrastructure. Checks are arriving in bank accounts and GDP is poised to expand rapidly. The prospects for economic growth are bright. Policymakers are now faced with a challenge: how do we avoid the pitfalls of the post-2008 recovery period, where the wealthiest workers and large corporations saw their fortunes boom, but low-wage workers were left behind? How do we ensure that North Carolina's most vulnerable working families secure a fair and just share of our economic growth, and aren't shoved aside in lieu of the already rich - again?



Our answer:

The Hourly Workers Package.

The Hourly Workers Package is a set of proposed reforms tailored to break away from the recent historical pattern of lopsided economic growth accruing mostly to the already-wealthy, instead of to front-line workers. These reforms range from the modest to the somewhat bold, but are all proven and tested methods to make sure that middle and working-class people are put at the front of the line to realize the gains of economic expansion - instead of last place.

Last year, North Carolina's hourly workers were essential.
Today, they still are.
It's time we treat them like it.



1

RAISE THE WAGE

Direct growth into fair wages.

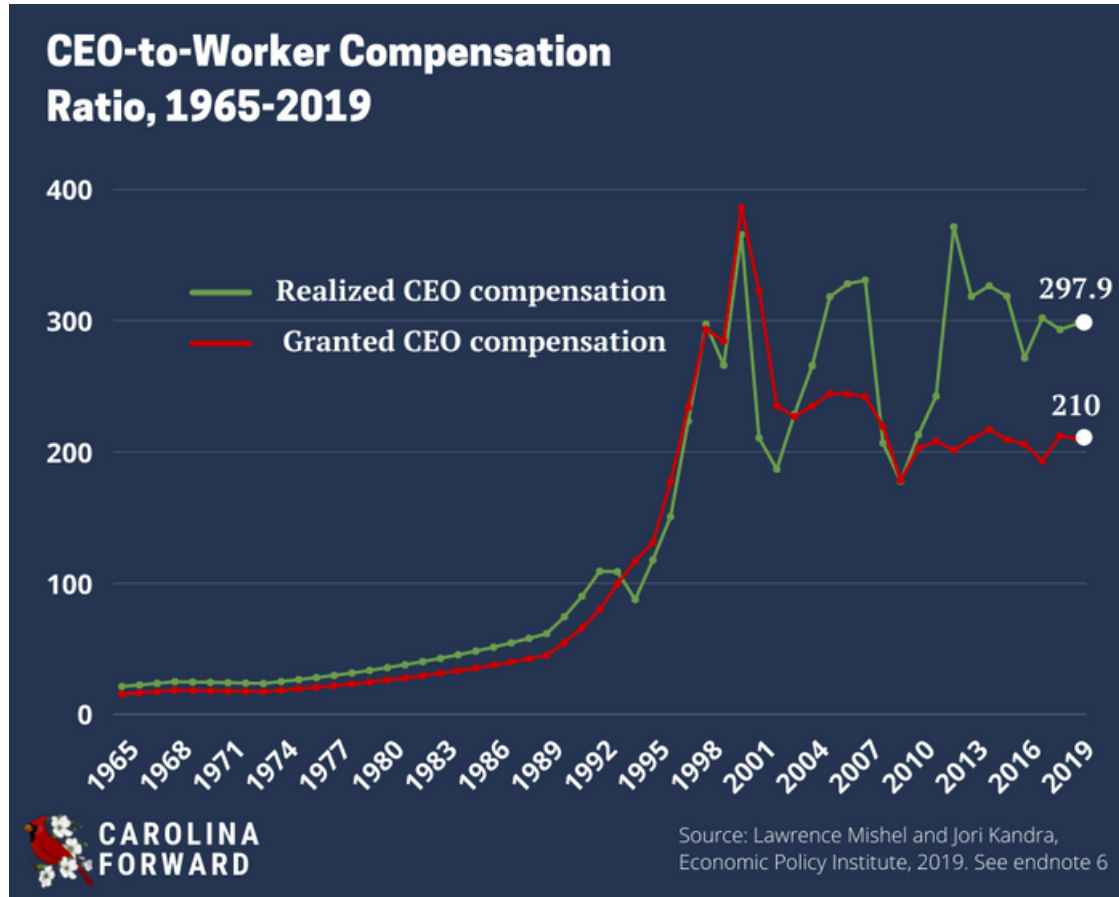


In North Carolina, the legal minimum wage is the same as the federal minimum: \$7.25 an hour. We find that the median wages for most of the state's low-wage workers - who represent almost half of all workers - is around \$9-\$10 an hour (see Page 6). This represents a very slim improvement. The real purchasing power of today's minimum wage is 31% lower than it was when instituted in 1968, and 17% lower than when it was last raised in 2009.⁴ It does not even remotely represent a living wage in any county in North Carolina.⁵



Even working overtime as an hourly worker does not guarantee one enough to afford rent - let alone support a family, buy groceries or just take in a movie - in any of North Carolina's major job-generating counties. This is indecent. Not only is raising the minimum wage the right thing to do, but North Carolinians themselves strongly support it.⁷

American
CEOs now
make
almost **300**
times more
than their
average
worker



Most low-wage hourly workers work at large, profitable corporations,⁸ not small businesses, and these large firms raise wages only very reluctantly. In the economics literature, these wages are known as “sticky.” Even when facing ample customer demand, many businesses strongly resist raising wages, preferring instead to rely on temporary bonuses, perks, or simply a disposable, high-turnover workforce. Without the ability to negotiate collectively, it is functionally impossible for individual workers to negotiate for a better deal.

After the 2008 crash, as corporate profits quickly rebounded with the economic recovery, we saw companies direct new cash flow into rapidly increasing executive compensation and stock buybacks, both of which soared in relation to worker pay. Many times, the very companies that relied on taxpayer subsidies and bailouts for



their recovery diverted that recovery to shareholders and executives - not their workers. Instead of watching this perverse pattern repeat itself again, we have the opportunity today to ensure that a bigger portion of that growth lands in workers' pockets. **For most hourly labor-intensive companies, a \$15 minimum wage would mean only a slightly larger, but still small, piece of the pie going to workers.**

Yet a \$15 per hour wage would be a game changer for North Carolina's millions of hourly workers. Even before the COVID recession, a large percentage of new jobs being created in our state were low-wage, service-sector positions. Multiple waves of permanently low-wage work have taken root across our state economy. A higher minimum wage would lift the standard of living for low-income families, especially in rural areas that already have some of the state's



highest poverty rates. Higher living standards have been shown to have extraordinary knock-on effects for working families, ranging from better educational outcomes to better health. Our state's workers deserve to live those lives.

Make these gains permanent

Policymakers can and should do better than a decennial kicking of the can on this issue, and create a more permanent solution that puts North Carolina's hourly workers first in line to benefit from economic growth. The best way to do that would be to permanently index the state's minimum wage to inflation. This way, as the cost of living increases, so would the wage floor for hourly workers - exactly the same way adjustments to Social Security benefits are made today.

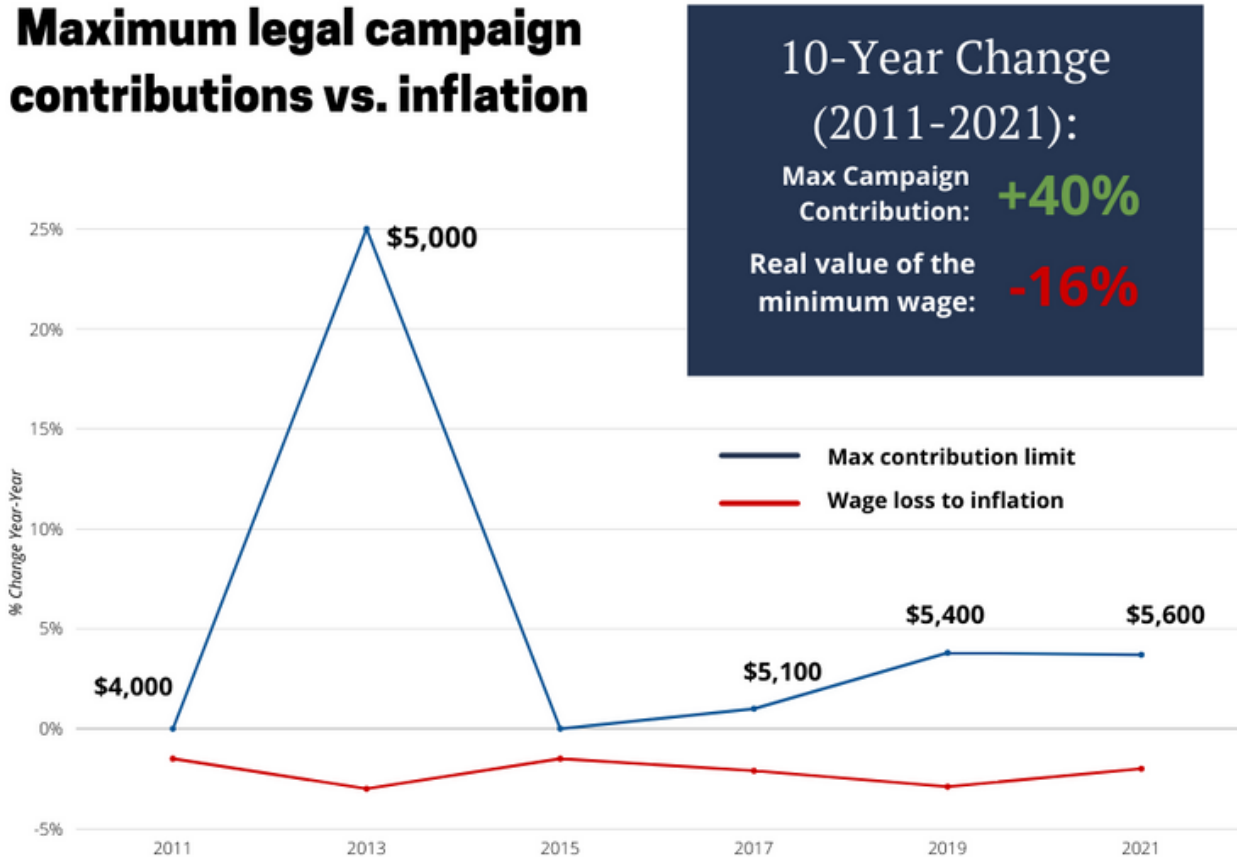
In fact, we know this is an effective system because North Carolina's politicians have already made such an arrangement for *themselves* in the form of the state's maximum legal campaign contribution limit.



In 2013, state leaders changed North Carolina's election laws to automatically increase the maximum contribution limit to their political campaigns every cycle - indexed to inflation. It's rising \$200, from \$5,400 to \$5,600, in the 2022 cycle.

If increases for inflation are good enough for politicians, they should be good enough for North Carolina's workers, too.

Maximum legal campaign contributions vs. inflation



Source: NC SBE; Bureau of Labor Statistics

North Carolina's minimum wage law is also full of gaping loopholes that employers use to improperly evade labor costs. These include misclassifying workers (including "gig workers," like Uber drivers) as "independent contractors," huge exemption categories for agricultural and domestic workers, and the "tipped wage," wherein employees are expected to make up for even lower minimum wages in tips. These loopholes should be closed. The minimum wage should be just that: a basic, reliable minimum that every worker in North Carolina can expect. Working people, as well as employers themselves, deserve a level playing field.



2

END WAGE THEFT

Workers must be paid what they've earned.

Wage theft is theft - no less than stealing a car or a phone. When employers do not pay their employees the wages they have rightfully earned, they are misappropriating property that belongs to those workers. Unfortunately, while one may call the police to report a stolen car, it is significantly more difficult to report, let alone recover, stolen wages - and employers know it.

“Wage theft” may refer to any number of very common ways that employers cheat employees out of their wages. Just a few examples:

- requiring work “off the clock”
- withholding paychecks
- time clock rounding (where an employer rounds down time worked)
- Simply not paying wages promised, including for:
 - earned vacation pay
 - commissions
 - overtime pay



Wage theft is, unfortunately, extremely common, particularly in food service, home health and agricultural sectors. Research shows that unscrupulous employers steal millions of dollars in wages from North Carolina’s workers every single year.⁹ In a state whose legislature touts the moral imperative to let workers keep more of the fruits of their labor, wage theft makes a mockery of the social contract.

Sadly, oversight and enforcement by the state’s Department of Labor has long been quite relaxed, or simply nonexistent. Long led by an extremely employer-friendly Commissioner of Labor, the state DOL has traditionally closed most wage theft investigations without making any serious enforcement attempt at all.



There are two ways leaders can address this.

First, North Carolina should pass clear and enforceable laws prohibiting employers from blatantly stealing wages from their workers. The state’s Wage and Hour Act should be amended to explicitly prohibit “off the clock” labor and missing wages, and mandate heavy fines as a deterrent. Cheated employees could also be permitted to sue as a class, and be awarded enhanced damages for successful wage theft claims.

Secondly, the state must make changes to the Department of Labor itself.

Wage theft, like many workplace issues, is a problem where active enforcement is typically required to investigate and provide a remedy. Many forms of wage theft are, after all, against the law already. But when the Commissioner of Labor isn’t motivated



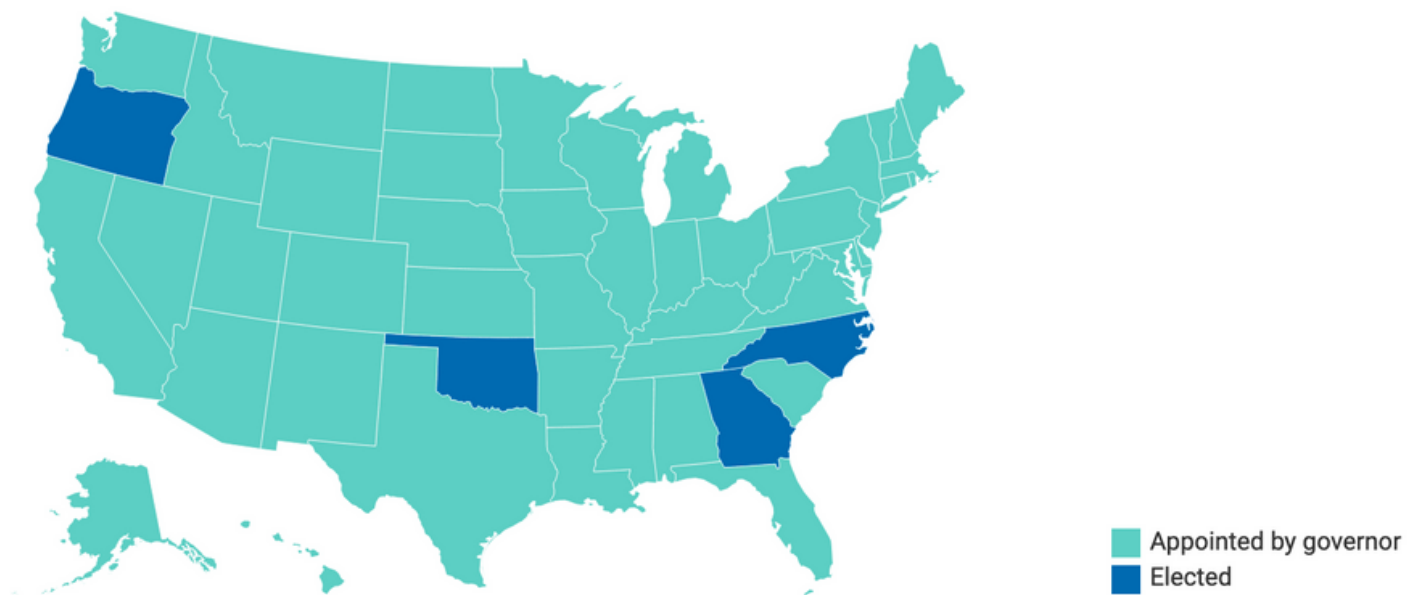
Former Commissioner of Labor Cherie Berry

to *enforce* the law due to political or personal inclination, employers may perceive a “go-ahead” signal to abuse their power. This not only harms vulnerable and cheated workers, but it also undermines the rule of law.



There are several ways the state could fix this issue. One would be to allocate a specific and non-fungible budget for wage theft investigation and enforcement inside the DOL, ensuring that investigators (1) exist on staff and (2) have the resources to do their job. Another way would be to levy heavy, mandatory fines on employers who cheat workers out of earned pay, and make company owners themselves personally liable. Yet another would be to set up a fund inside the DOL for substantiated, and yet unrecovered, wage theft claims that would help reimburse cheated workers. This would help incentivize the DOL itself to do its job.

Finally, North Carolina should change its state constitution to make the Commissioner of Labor an appointed, not elected, office.



BALLOTPEDIA

In 46 other states, the Commissioner of Labor is a position appointed by the governor, and North Carolina should amend its constitution to become the 47th. As a low-visibility office completely unknown to most voters, the Commissioner of Labor position is particularly vulnerable to regulatory capture by the very industry they oversee. This has plainly occurred here. Appointment of the state's top labor official is a better way to align governance in the state's executive branch and make the office functional once again.



3

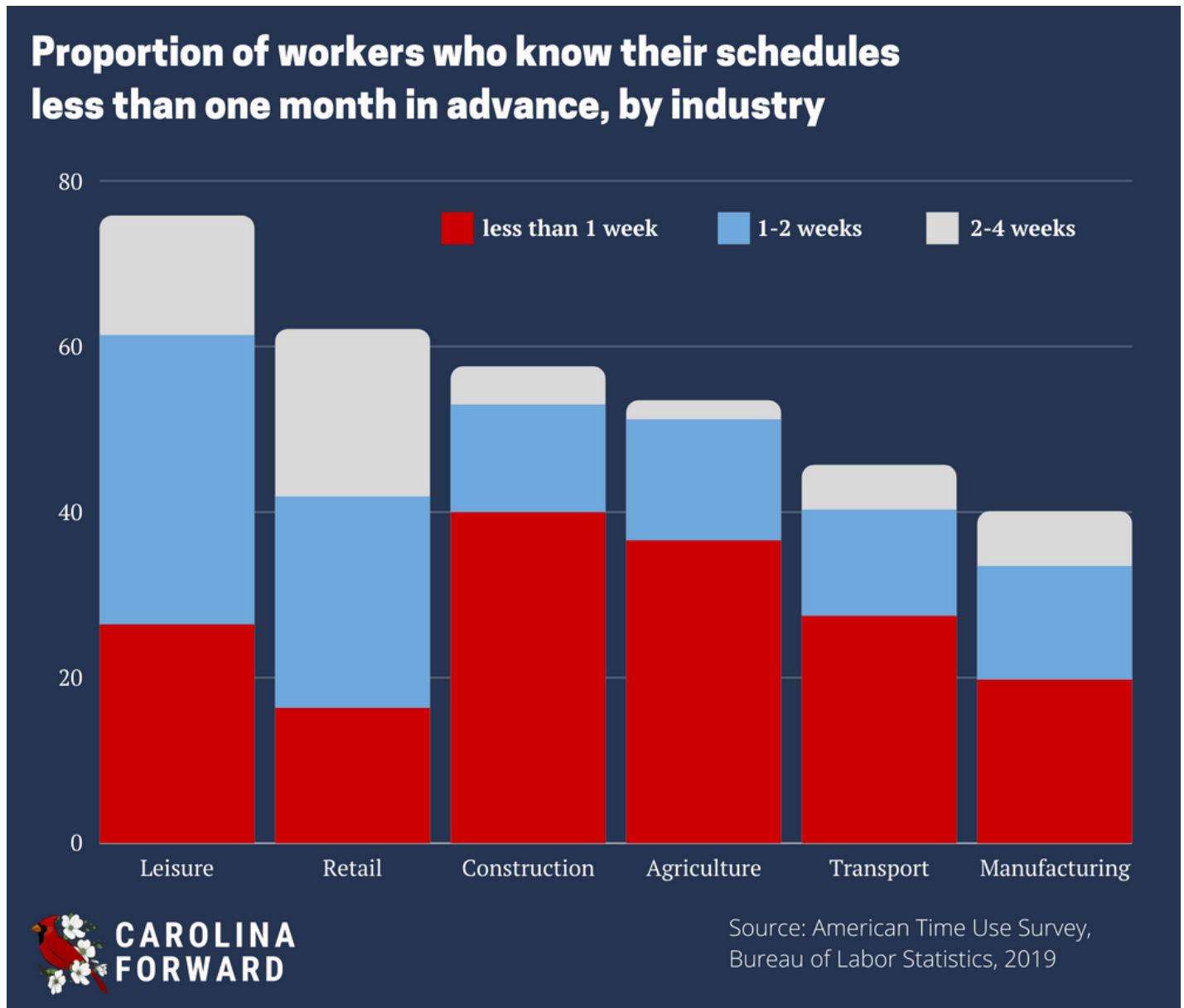
FAIR SCHEDULING AND LEAVE

Give workers a break.

One widespread aspect of hourly jobs is variable scheduling. While some hourly jobs have standardized, predictable schedules, many (or most) do not. 1 in 5 workers knows their schedule less than one week in advance,¹¹ and this is certainly an overestimate in many industries. According to another survey, among food service and retail employees, one-third of workers had less than one week of scheduling notice.¹²

Anyone who has worked in retail, food service, home health or construction has probably experienced on-call shifts where one must be ready to come in and work, but isn't yet on the clock, or worked back-to-back closing/reopening shifts. These not only levy large uncertainty on employees, but also great burdens on their home lives.





“Just-in-time” scheduling practices like this reduce labor costs for employers by transferring them to their workers in the form of unpredictability. Many of these hourly workers cannot say with confidence how much they will work, and thus earn, from one week to the next. This lack of predictability creates significant hardship in people’s personal lives.

As noted earlier, 1 in 4 low-wage hourly workers is also caring for children at home, and arranging childcare with an unpredictable schedule is a nightmare (if it’s possible at all). This point is critical: work-life conflict caused by schedule unpredictability affects not just pocketbooks, but marriages, children, housing and general wellbeing. For the 1 in 4 hourly workers who also receive public assistance, working less than a minimum number of hours may also result in losing benefits through no fault of their own.



25%

Hourly workers
also caring for
children

25%

Hourly workers
relying on public
assistance

30%

Over 45
years old

North Carolina's leaders have several options to address this issue.

One straightforward remedy would be to impose tangible costs to employers for unpredictable schedules. This could take the form of requiring extra pay for last-minute scheduling changes and on-call shifts, as they have done in Oregon.¹³ And where just-in-time scheduling is necessary (or the employer finds it worthwhile), the state can require higher wages for employees whose schedules are permanently subject to last-minute changes.

Finally, all workers need breaks from time to time. Currently, North Carolina labor law requires no paid breaks, whatsoever. This is inhumane. Leaders could mandate one or more paid breaks of 15 to 20 minutes per 5 or 6-hour shift. Paid sick days should be made mandatory, so that workers who are too sick to work aren't forced to show up anyway because they cannot afford not to.

People died during the COVID pandemic simply because they lacked paid sick time and could not afford to not work. This is unworthy of America in the 21st century.

38%

NC's workforce with
no paid sick time¹⁴



Workers should be able to use those paid sick days to care for themselves *or* ill family members (also known as “kin care”). They must also have access to paid “safe leave” for workers (usually, but not exclusively women) escaping domestic violence or recovering from assault.

These types of reforms would not cost employers significantly more, but would measurably improve workers’ lives and livelihoods.



4

FIX UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

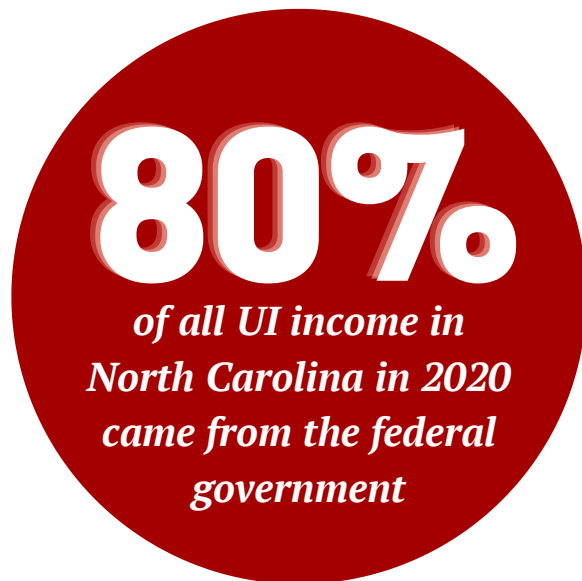
Bring back the safety net.

Today, North Carolina's unemployment insurance system ranks among the nation's absolute worst. The system ranks close to last in terms of the amount of weekly benefits (an average of \$235/week in 2020¹⁵), the number of weeks the unemployed can access them (theoretically between 12 and 20, but less than 10 in practice), and how long it takes the state to distribute those benefits (several weeks). Even before the COVID pandemic, fewer than 10% of eligible jobless North Carolinians received benefits - the very lowest rate in the country.¹⁶

Unemployment benefits are an easy political target: exactly like a safety net or a fire extinguisher in your house, no one notices them until it's extremely personally urgent to have them around. Needing one is also highly unpredictable.



Yet economic research is unambiguous on this topic: unemployment insurance is one of the most effective tools policymakers have to fight recessions and the economic impact of job loss.¹⁷ Unemployment insurance is a safety net, albeit a thin one, that keeps people fed and families in their houses following job loss. It cushions consumer demand during sharp economic shocks (like the COVID pandemic) and helps keep local markets from seizing up.



During the COVID crisis, the gaping holes in our state’s threadbare unemployment insurance system were laid bare for all to see. As claims skyrocketed, the crippled state system was even less able to service them in a timely manner. Those lucky few who were able to access any benefits at all received a pittance only several weeks after submitting claims (long after rent checks and groceries are due); many received nothing at all. It was from the federal government, not the state of North Carolina, that most people finally received assistance.¹⁸

This system is not an accident. North Carolina’s unemployment insurance system was once an enviable national model, but was revamped in 2013 under Governor Pat McCrory to be weaker, thinner and far stingier. In fact, the system pretty much worked as designed: it failed to provide much relief at all, exactly as its critics in 2013 had predicted it would under high demand.



North Carolina State Unemployment Benefits Vs. National Average

| | North Carolina | Δ | U.S. Average |
|--|----------------|------|--------------|
| Weekly benefit amount (2021 Actual) | \$244 | -23% | \$317 |
| Maximum weekly benefit | \$350 | -27% | \$477 |
| Number of eligible weeks | 12 | -54% | 26 |



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment & Training Administration data

These are not intractable, or even particularly difficult, problems to solve. Abandoning the unemployed to their fate is a political choice, not an economic necessity.

North Carolina can and should better serve its temporarily unemployed. State leaders should bring the unemployment insurance system up to the national average of 26 weeks in duration and 50% of the state’s average weekly insured wage. Leaders should also appropriate more adequate resources for the state’s Division of Employment Security in the Department of Commerce to more quickly and efficiently process claims, so that the unemployed are not left waiting weeks or months for help to arrive.



5

UNLOCK WORKER MOBILITY

Let workers move for better wages.

Preventing workers from moving freely from one employer to another to arbitrage their skills for higher wages hurts workers and stunts economic growth. Laws that prevent this movement amount to a subsidy to employers, most of all large ones, and hurt workers' earning power. In a free and fair labor market, workers should be able to sell their labor to the top bidder, and the laws governing those transactions should have their back.

Yet today, many laws on North Carolina's books take the opposite approach, protecting big employers' power over that of their workers. This position should be reversed.



One way would be to explicitly ban non-compete agreements and make them unenforceable in our state. Non-competes have become increasingly common in low-wage hourly jobs, famously so in fast-food restaurants, among healthcare aides and even for janitors. Non-compete agreements in these industries have nothing to do with protecting employer intellectual property, and everything to do with preventing workers seeking higher wages from a competing firm. Non-competes should be banned - if not outright, then at the very least for workers earning some multiple (say, 500%) of the federal poverty level.



Next, the state should introduce explicit laws banning “no-poaching” agreements for franchise operators. Such agreements are common, particularly in the restaurant industry, where franchise operators agree not to hire away workers from one



another. This reduces labor demand, hurts overall job growth and particularly suppresses wages. The winners are, of course, franchise owners themselves, who are far from low-wage earners. Attorney General Josh Stein has successfully won settlements against several restaurant franchises for their no-poaching policies already, but legislators should prohibit the practice by law.

Franchise chain restaurants like Jimmy Johns, Cinnabon and McDonalds have colluded in the past on "no-poaching" agreements to prevent their workers from switching restaurants in search of higher pay.



Finally, policymakers should examine the topic of occupational licensure.¹⁹ In North Carolina, as in the country as a whole, the number of occupations requiring some form of legal license to work has rapidly grown. This growth has produced disparities that don't always make sense (ex. it takes twice as much time to become a barber in North Carolina than a police officer). While many forms of licensure are perfectly reasonable, others are less so, and are more the product of interest group lobbying than anything else. Legislators should review the licensure regime in North Carolina with an eye towards sharply reducing the overall number of professions requiring it.



6

STRENGTHEN WORKER VOICES

Empower workers to bargain.

North Carolina has a relatively low level of unionization in its workplaces.²⁰ This is both because of historical reasons (a tradition of low-wage industries like textiles and agriculture) and the state’s “right to work” law, passed in 1947 as a part of a wave of racist social legislation.²¹ “Right-to-work” directly undercuts workers’ attempts to unionize because it permits those represented by a union to enjoy the benefits of collective bargaining without joining that same union.

2.7%

*Percent of North
Carolina workers who
belong to a union*



Supporters of “right-to-work” argue that it is unfair to require workers in unionized workplaces to pay dues to a union. This is a reasonable objection on face, until one considers the way unionization works. Unions are not recognized unless a majority of workers vote for one. Thus, if a majority of workers at a company voluntarily choose to form a union, they are actively choosing to pay for it out of their wages. Moreover, union workers also earn more on average than non-union ones,²² leaving them better-off even before considering other negotiated benefits like health insurance, sick leave and improved working conditions.

“Right to work” has also tilted the political playing field against the state’s workers for generations, distorting state politics in the process. In spite of North Carolina’s enduring blue-collar character, big business has tended to get almost everything it wants from the General Assembly, no matter which party has been in power.



In our era of increasing corporate power over the American economy, our society and its politics, empowering workers through union-based collective bargaining would be a powerful corrective step returning some power to working people. An individual poultry plant worker, delivery man, nurse or retail employee has vanishingly little power to negotiate with their boss over wages and working conditions, but a firm’s whole, collective workforce has much more. By bargaining as a whole, workers negotiate more as peers with management than individuals can, and accordingly can flex more muscle.

North Carolina should repeal its “right to work” statute and join the 22 other states that permit employees (including public employees) to unionize and bargain collectively with employers over wages and benefits.



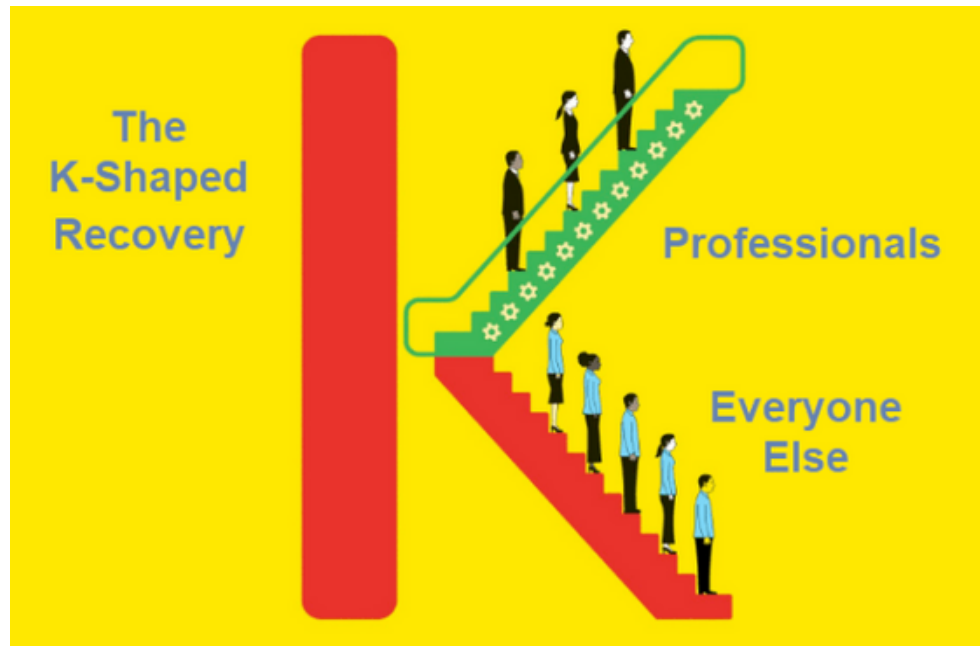
EIGHT HOURS FOR WHAT WE WILL

North Carolina is poised to grow even more rapidly over the next decade.

After adding nearly a million new residents in the last 10 years, our state is likely to match that or exceed it in the '20s. The state's economy, already well over half a trillion dollars, will grow even faster. These are secular, long-term trends that have little to do with any particular political party. This growth is not, however, guaranteed to reach all corners of North Carolina's economy, let alone do so equitably. In fact, it is highly unlikely to do so - unless our leaders act.



It's up to us, the people of North Carolina, to determine what that growth should look like. Should North Carolina's growth continue to bifurcate, and further widen the gulf between haves and have-nots? Should the post-COVID recovery look like that of post-2008, when low-wage workers were left behind while the professional class grew wealthier?



No matter what happens, there's no doubt that high-earners will continue to do well; but we have a rare opportunity now to put into place a system that ensures that low-wage workers receive a fairer share of growth.

The cruelest thing to do would be not to try.

Neither political party in our state has an enviable track record of offering low-wage hourly workers tangible policies to support. But there are good reasons for them to do so, not only because it is smart policy, but also out of sheer political self-interest. Both parties flatter themselves as defenders of the “working class,” for example, but interpret that label very differently. It is up to political leaders not only to give these voters policies worth voting for, but to communicate them clearly.

In the meantime, North Carolina's hourly workers are on the job and playing an essential role in keeping our economy going. They work eight hours on their feet, often without a break, relieve themselves in bottles or in a sympathetic convenience store's restroom, and scramble to work on 30 minutes' notice because they're on call. Better pay, better conditions and more equitable negotiating power are all possible for these men and women - but only if our leaders can summon the wherewithal to unlock their potential.





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CONTRIBUTORS

Blair Reeves is the Executive Director of Carolina Forward.

Alexander H. Jones is a writer and policy analyst based in Chapel Hill.

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