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The Human Cost of Inaction

Public policy should be based on sound data and analysis of economic conditions and trends, but legislators should never lose sight of the real people their decisions impact. Below are the stories of six Ohio workers with firsthand knowledge of Ohio's economy and the policies shaping it.

Mark,* Fast-food worker, Grove City

**Name has been changed to protect interviewee's anonymity.*

Mark is a young man who lives with his mom and sisters near Grove City (a suburb of Columbus). He works in a fast-food restaurant and has connected with the Central Ohio Worker Center. He is working hard toward a future that includes college, a career in coding, and eventually building a stable future for a family of his own. But like many low-wage workers, saving money to make that future a reality is tough because he is paid near the minimum wage. It's hard to get ahead when so much of his paycheck is needed to cover everyday expenses.

"Raising the minimum wage to $15 an hour would make a huge difference. A lot of people depend on these jobs to care for their families or as a second job to deal with rising costs," Mark said. "It would help people breathe a little easier to be able to deal with an unexpected cost or work towards their goals."

Mark can attest to the fact that that low-wage work is often physically demanding, understaffed, and undervalued. Workers are frequently asked to take on additional responsibilities without additional pay.

"People think it's an easy job, but it's not. A lot of times we're doing the work of several people because there aren't enough workers," he said. "I wish people would be more patient with fast-food workers and other low-wage workers. We're working hard!"

Across Ohio, workers like Mark and their families are seeing the costs of housing, groceries, transportation, college, and other necessities continue to rise while wages stay stuck in the mud.

"People are working extra, taking second jobs, losing time with their families, and still struggling to afford rent and groceries. That's affecting a lot of families, including mine."

Raising the minimum wage would help hundreds of thousands of workers like Mark move towards their goals and get closer to the economic security every worker deserves.

Jade and Tim, Library workers, Worthington

Jade is a library worker and Secretary of Worthington Public Libraries United. She joined the bargaining committee to form a union motivated by concerns about workplace instability and the need for workers to have a stronger voice in decisions affecting their jobs.

"Unionizing has granted us an incredible amount of security that didn't exist before," Jade said. "We now have just-cause protections that prevent workers from being fired without reason. We also now have negotiating power which has translated to increased raises, increased PTO, tuition reimbursement, and access to paid parental leave."

Those improvements have had a noticeable impact on daily life at work and beyond. According to Jade, fairer pay has improved morale, reduced turnover, and created lines of communication and strong processes for workers to address workplace concerns. The benefits of collective bargaining also extend beyond the workplace.

"Higher wages mean not having to choose between healthcare and groceries," she said. "That means better long-term health outcomes for our communities, increased stability, and more civic engagement. When you have enough money to provide for baseline necessities, you can start living life rather than merely surviving."

Tim also works at Worthington Public Libraries as a Youth Services Library Associate. Originally from Northeast Ohio, he moved to Columbus for better opportunities in his field. The union was one of the reasons he applied for and accepted this job. He has experienced the difference it makes when workers can address workplace issues and concerns together through their union.

"This is the first place that I have worked that has been unionized, and I really do feel the difference a union makes," Tim said. "Issues arise at all workplaces, and with the union we have a seat at the table and can address them collectively. This increases confidence and makes for a stronger workplace. We were one of the first library systems in central Ohio to unionize and the benefits have led to a wave of other libraries joining in, like Pickerington, Upper Arlington, and Delaware Public Libraries, and Columbus Metropolitan Library."

The benefits of unionizing extend beyond a better workplace culture. Tim says the wages and guaranteed raises negotiated through collective bargaining have helped provide greater financial stability and peace of mind.

"This is the best hourly pay that I have ever had," he said. "Knowing that at least for the next several years I can count on guaranteed raises takes some stress off my shoulders. Every worker deserves a union!"

For workers like Jade and Tim, collective bargaining demonstrates how coming together with coworkers can create better jobs, higher wages, and greater economic security for workers and their families.

Tom, Software engineer, Marion

Tom began working in his field while still in college and continued steadily through graduation in 2020. Earlier this year, he was laid off from his job at one of the world's largest banks. Four months later, despite applying to hundreds of positions and interviewing for more than a dozen roles, he is still searching for sustainable employment.

Ohio's unemployment compensation system has helped Tom stay afloat, but only just barely, and with help from family and friends. To make his unemployment compensation benefit stretch, he has cut subscriptions and memberships, paused payments on his student loans, and sharply reduced spending wherever possible. Even after those sacrifices, he says making ends meet remains a monthly struggle.

"It has not been sufficient," Tom said. "After rent and main bills I only have a small amount left over each month. I've wiped out my savings, every month I'm going into credit card debt, or borrowing from friends or family just to cover the basics."

The ongoing difficulty of finding work has underscored how quickly financial stability can erode after a layoff, even for workers with degrees and years of experience in their field. Like many unemployed workers who are not working due to no fault of their own, the challenges extend beyond finances.

"Navigating the unemployment compensation system is confusing, inconsistent, and stressful," Tom said. "The website Is outdated and it feels like benefits could be ripped out from underneath me at any moment as costs for everything continue to rise."

Unemployment compensation is an important part of a healthy economy, providing workers with temporary stability during periods of job loss. Tom's experience highlights how gaps in the system create uncertainty at the exact moment Ohio families need stability. Threats to cut weeks from 26 to 20 would only make things worse. Ohioans need a stronger, more accessible unemployment system.

Tamara, Educator, Dayton

Tamara Burnett is mother of five who has called Dayton home for the past 14 years. She has spent the last five years working in education, driven by a passion for helping people and giving back to her community. Tamara knows that childcare is essential to keep families stable and allow parents to work. Childcare costs are a constant challenge for her family, consuming a large share of her paycheck. Like many working parents, high costs create difficult financial tradeoffs that affect the entire household budget.

"I'm constantly worrying about what bill I will have to pay late just to make sure my childcare is paid," Tamara said. "I wish more people understood that childcare is not a luxury. It's a necessity that allows parents to work, support their families, and contribute to their communities."

For parents like Tamara, affordable and accessible childcare is a necessity for financial stability. Expanding access to affordable childcare would help more Ohio parents join or remain in the workforce, strengthen household finances, and ensure children have the care and support they need to succeed.

Amanda, Founder of Cincy Postpartum, Cincinnati

Amanda is a mother of two from Cincinnati who has experienced the difference paid leave can make for Ohioans trying to balance work, caregiving, and growing a family. When her first child was born, her family did not have access to paid leave. By the time her second child arrived, her husband had six weeks of paid leave, creating a much smoother transition for their family during the postpartum period. This inspired Amanda to leave her career in higher education administration, and start her business supporting postpartum families, Cincy Postpartum.

"Ohio families should not have to choose between caring for a new child or navigating a medical issue and maintaining their financial stability," she said. "The current system leaves too many families, especially those with lower incomes, without the time and support they need during important periods of their lives, including welcoming a new child."

"A statewide paid family and medical leave program would give parents the chance to bond with their baby, adjust to a major life change, and recover physically from labor and delivery," Amanda said. "Parents should have time to care for themselves, including mental health care, and transition into a new normal without worrying about losing their home or job."

Today, Amanda works closely with postpartum moms and families and regularly sees the challenges created by a lack of paid leave. Many parents know what resources and support they need but cannot access them because they lack the time or financial security to do so. Some leave the workforce entirely or lose their previous position and have to work a lower paying job because of caregiving demands.

"We all benefit when families have a strong start," Amanda said. "Paid leave can level the playing field. Right now the people that need paid leave the most are the least likely to have access to it. All Ohioans should be able care for their loved ones during critical periods without falling behind financially."

Creating a state paid family and medical leave policy, like Massachusetts and Virigina have done, would mean more stability for Ohio families when they welcome a new child, care for a loved one, or deal with a serious health condition.