

RESOLUTION 14

RENEWING THE PROMISE WITH YOUNG WORKERS

Submitted by the Committee on Legislation/Policy and the Executive Council

There is a new energy across the country fueled by young workers who are standing up and fighting for rights and a voice in the workplace. These workers, relatively new to the workforce and labor movement, are fighting back against economic injustice, and leading a new wave of the movement with levels of enthusiasm and commitment unparalleled in decades.

Although only 5.3% of workers ages 16–24 are represented for the purposes of collective bargaining, their support for unions and zeal for collective action is unmistakable. Recent polls show that the vast majority of young workers—77% of those ages 18–34—support unions.

For too many young workers, the so-called American dream is an unattainable fantasy they will work toward but never realize. Decades of union-busting and labor cost cutting by employers have led to a dearth of good jobs and stagnant wages for young people. The concurrent effects of significant student loan debt and oppressive costs of living in large cities leave little room for error or unexpected costs, let alone saving or investment. The prospect of buying a home, saving for retirement or paying for college is out of reach for these workers. More than 65% of workers younger than 35 are renting their home, up approximately 10% since 2006. Millennials and Gen Z make up about 40% of the workforce, but own only 5.9% of household wealth, while workers close to or at retirement age make up 25% of the workforce and own 53% of household net worth. While less than a quarter of workers younger than 25 believe Social Security will help fund their retirement, many prioritize having a fixed, lifetime monthly benefit at retirement.

Young workers also are fighting for transparency, dignity in the workplace and increased opportunities for people of color, LGBTQ+ individuals and people with disabilities.

In many industries, such as higher education and media, workers recognize the systemic issues within their workplaces as the most vulnerable workers are set aside, passed up for advancement, kept behind the scenes and unfairly compensated.

Across industries and sectors of our economy, young workers are not waiting to be given good jobs or to be organized; they are joining together to create the jobs they deserve. They're using innovative social media strategies to mobilize and reach millions of people, and organizing unions at their jobs more than other age groups. Recent collective action and union organizing efforts at Amazon, Starbucks, REI, nonprofit organizations, tech and video game companies, universities and media outlets have shown that young workers are seeking changes in the workplace and finding the labor movement as the best tool to do so.

The AFL-CIO's agenda for young workers includes the following components:

- Invest in young workers by recruiting and engaging young workers in AFL-CIO programs and campaigns.
- Reignite and implement a Young Worker Program to, among other things, foster solidarity with young worker organizing and first contract efforts, and develop partnerships with young worker advocacy groups.
- Support legislation to aid young worker efforts, e.g.,
 - College athlete and graduate student right to organize
 - Student debt
- Promote a nationwide push to engage high schoolers on the benefits of collective bargaining and apprenticeships.
- Support the global labor movement's efforts to advance a new social contract to prevent the exclusion of young people and build a resilient future grounded in social and economic justice for all.