“Out of Touch: When Union Politics Leave Workers Behind”

Testimony for the U.S. House Committee on Education and Workforce

Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor, and Pensions

Akash Chougule

September 15, 2026

Introduction

Chairman Allen, Ranking Member DeSaulnier, and members of the Subcommittee: thank you for the opportunity to testify today about how federal labor policy can better protect the rights of American workers. My name is Akash Chougule. I am an honorary senior fellow at the Institute for the American Worker (I4AW), a 501c3 organization dedicated to championing worker freedom and modern labor policy for a modern workforce, and President of the Foundation for Research on Equal Opportunity (FREOPP), a think tank dedicated to expanding opportunity and upward mobility for Americans on the bottom half of the socioeconomic ladder through free enterprise, individual liberty, technological innovation, and pluralism.

I have spent more than a decade working on labor policy and upward mobility, and I have seen repeatedly how workers represented by a union can be left with too little voice in the political, economic, and workplace decisions made on their behalf by union leaders. There is an urgent need for federal reform that puts workers first, protects their voices, respects their rights, and advances their interests. Unions operating on a model built for the economy of 1935 need to adapt to the workforce of today – lest they risk stagnating themselves into further irrelevance as their numbers dwindle. In addition to the well-documented decline in the union membership rate over the last several decades, it is worth noting here a 2022 Gallup poll showing that just 11% of nonunion workers were "extremely interested" in joining a union. 58% were "not interested at all."[1] There is no doubt that unions' rigid, combative, antiquated, and hyper-partisan model is a major driver of these numbers.

First, let me begin by affirming: worker freedom is not antithetical to workers' right to organize in the private sector as protected by the National Labor Relations Act. Nor does it prevent unions from exercising their First Amendment right to engage in the political process or policy advocacy. To allege that greater freedom, transparency, and accountability within labor organizations undermines the right to organize or engage in political speech is false.

It is simply a matter of fact that the status quo in organized labor is completely broken. Some seek to remedy this by further expanding the coercive power of union leadership. Instead, policymakers should recognize that policy must change to better protect the rights of workers, and labor leaders should recognize that greater accountability in representing those workers is critical to reversing unions' decline.

[1] Justin McCarthy, "U.S. Approval of Labor Unions at Highest Point Since 1965," Gallup, August 30, 2022, https://news.gallup.com/poll/398303/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx.

Politics and Policy

Politically, 87% of union political spending benefited the Democratic Party in the 2024 campaign cycle.[2] In the 2024 election, 45% of union households voted for the Republican candidate for president.[3] Since 2010, unions have spent more than $1.6 billion in member dues supporting progressive causes and organizations.[4] While unions have a right to support the candidates and causes of their choosing, the fact is that union leaders who make these engagement decisions are out of step with the political diversity of their members. Despite union members' broad support for right-leaning candidates and causes, union leaders largely do not adopt a political strategy that reflects their members' views.

Workers should not have to guess whether their union's political activity reflects their beliefs. H.R. 6156, the Endorsement Transparency Act, introduced by Representative Bob Onder (R-MO), Vice Chair of this Subcommittee, in November 2025, offers a simple, pro-worker fix: before a union endorses a presidential candidate, it would have to poll its members and share the results with them.[5] The bill does not tell unions whom to support and does not restrict their political activity in any way. It simply asks that leaders find out what their members think before speaking in their name in the political process. This is particularly important for labor unions

---

[2] OpenSecrets, "Beyond Labor Day: How Unions' Political Power Extends Year-Round," August 2026, https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2026/08/beyond-labor-day-how-unions-political-power-extends-year-round.

[3] Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, "How Groups Voted in 2024," Cornell University, 2024, https://ropercenter.cornell.edu/how-groups-voted-2024.

[4] Center for Union Facts, *How Labor Unions Finance Their Political Agenda: 2010–2018* (n.d.), accessed September 5, 2026, https://employeerightsact.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/2010-2018_ERA_HowLaborUnionsFinanceTheirPolAgenda-3.pdf.

[5] Endorsement Transparency Act, H.R. 6156, 119th Cong. (2025), https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/6156.

because in 24 states, workers can be forced to pay union representational fees as a condition of employment.[6]

There is no other major institution in American politics and policy that can force millions of Americans to fund it at risk of losing their livelihood.

On the policy front, union leaders oppose many proposals that union members overwhelmingly support, such as those in the Employee Rights Act, H.R. 4154.[7] The Employee Rights Act requires unions to receive opt-in permission from a union member before using his or her dues and fees on political activity or policy advocacy – a provision which enjoys 81% support from union households. It guarantees that workers have a right to a secret-ballot election in all unionization campaigns—a policy that 72% of union households support. It protects employees from discriminatory, harassing, and demeaning language during a unionization campaign—a measure with 76% support from union households. Whether it's protecting workers' privacy in unionization campaigns (80% union household support), ensuring independent contractors' ability to set their own hours (77% union household support), or any of its other policies, the Employee Rights Act delivers reforms that union members back. [8] Yet I am not aware of any labor union that backs the bill.

---

[6] National Right to Work Legal Defense and Education Foundation, "Right to Work States," accessed September 5, 2026, https://www.nrtw.org/right-to-work-states/.

[7] Guerino J. Calemine III, testimony before the Subcommittee on Health, Employment, Labor, and Pensions, Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives, *Legislative Reforms to the National Labor Relations Act: H.R. 2776, Workforce Democracy and Fairness Act; H.R. 2775, Employee Privacy Protection Act; and H.R. 2723, Employee Rights Act*, 115th Cong., June 14, 2017, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-115hhrg25712/pdf/CHRG-115hhrg25712.pdf.

[8] Big Village, *Employee Rights Act Public Support* (2025), https://employeerightsact.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/CUF-ERA-Public-Support-2025.pdf.

As with politics, union leaders are free to support or oppose whatever policies they choose. But it is notable and concerning that they refuse to back so many policies that their own members overwhelmingly want—policies that would empower and protect those very workers.

Injustice in the Workplace

The divide between union leaders and members on politics and policy is wide, but the situation is often even worse in the workplace and at the bargaining table. Union leaders actively back laws and make contract demands that either don't help workers or actively harm them.

Faster Labor Contracts Act

A timely example is the Faster Labor Contracts Act (FLCA), H.R. 5408, which the House of Representatives passed in June 2026.[9] While the bill has been sold as a means of securing first contracts on a speedier timeline, this legislation would actually empower unelected arbitrators to impose contracts on workers without a vote and potentially against their will. The FLCA would shift power away from workers toward union leadership and outside decisionmakers.

Under the FLCA, arbitrators are required to write and impose a binding first contract with no vote by the workers who must live under it, and nothing in the bill limits what subjects that contract may cover. Workers may think that means a contract would focus exclusively on

---

[9] U.S. House of Representatives, "Roll Call 216," 119th Cong., 2nd sess., June 9, 2026, Congress.gov, https://www.congress.gov/votes/house/119-2/216.

relevant matters like wages, benefits, and hours, but they may be surprised to learn that many union contracts stray into social and political issues that have no bearing on the workplace.

Michael Alcorn, an employee at Trader Joe's, saw this firsthand. As he wrote in the *Wall Street Journal:*

> *Instead of focusing solely on issues like wages and benefits, union representatives demanded that the company allow different pronoun pins. They also demanded that the company cover abortion and gender-affirming care in its health plans, which the company already did. I expected the union to focus on more important issues. In 2025 the union demanded the store become an Immigration and Customs Enforcement sanctuary.*[10]

Some may applaud the union for their positions on these issues, but they were undeniably irrelevant for the vast majority of workers the union sought to represent and clearly intended primarily to make a political statement. Under the FLCA, workers could soon find themselves forced into union contracts that include a host of non-work-related issues. The *Wall Street Journal* has reported:

> *Take DEI—diversity, equity and inclusion—which unions have made part of their social-justice mission and collective-bargaining agreements. The General Teamsters Local Union No. 174 made DEI a feature of its negotiation with the Port of Seattle. The Writers*

[10] Michael Alcorn, "Unions Place Culture Wars Front and Center," *Wall Street Journal*, June 21, 2026, https://www.wsj.com/opinion/unions-place-culture-wars-front-and-center-fae9eb94. Alcorn is a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for the American Worker.

Guild of America, East, included DEI targets for the hiring process and a formal diversity committee in its bargaining with Vox Media.

The Screen Actors Guild and American Federation of Television and Radio Artists 2025 National Board resolution calls DEI a "moral imperative" and says that "systemic barriers to full and fair inclusion, equal employment opportunity, and accessibility persist, requiring continued vigilance and advocacy."

Or how about anti-Israel policies? In June, the United Auto Workers in Michigan voted to divest from Israel. The resolution cites the "billionaire class" and Israel's contribution to "undermine global worker unity by furthering settler colonialism, apartheid, dispossession, and genocide." Who knew the UAW had a Gaza policy?

The United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America delegates endorsed a resolution in October 2025 against "Israel's Genocide" and pledged to "mobilize our members and our allies to demand an end to the Israeli apartheid regime . . . and to pursue effective means to achieve it, such as BDS [boycott, divestment and sanctions]."

The student workers union at Columbia University demanded that the school "divest from any private company, state actor, or financial institution complicit in . . . crimes against humanity." The Graduate Labor Organization at Brown University also demanded the school divest from companies in Israel.[11]

[11] Editorial Board, "Big Labor, DEI and the GOP," *Wall Street Journal*, July 6, 2026, https://www.wsj.com/opinion/faster-labor-contracts-act-unions-dei-republicans-a3b1296d.

Reasonable people can disagree on these issues, but the idea that creating a baseline for collective bargaining that would include them is patently absurd. Yet the FLCA could do so, and if workers are forced into contracts, they would not be able to negotiate a new contract for two years.[12] They should not be forced into any contract at all—especially one that reflects union leaders' partisan and political preferences, instead of the genuine and specific needs of workers.

Transparency and Accountability

Union members need transparency so they can discern whether union leaders are serving their best interests. Non-unionized workers also need this transparency, which is essential for deciding if unionization is right for them. Unfortunately, union leaders routinely oppose efforts to provide transparency on their own actions, spending, and decisions within the union. Workers have a legitimate interest in knowing how their dues are spent and how decisions are made on their behalf, particularly because, as previously noted, in nearly half the states they can be forced to fund unions as a condition of employment.[13]

This desire to avoid accountability was on full display after the Department of Labor published a more detailed LM-2 reporting form in June 2026. These forms, which are required under the federal Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act – a law that was enacted in response to "instances of breach of trust, corruption, disregard of the rights of individual employees"[14] –

---

[12] Faster Labor Contracts Act, H.R. 5408, 119th Cong. (2025), https://www.congress.gov/bill/119th-congress/house-bill/5408.

[13] National Right to Work Legal Defense and Education Foundation, "Right to Work States," accessed September 5, 2026, https://www.nrtw.org/right-to-work-states/.

[14] Labor-Management Reporting and Disclosure Act of 1959, 29 U.S.C. § 401(b), https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/29/401.

have long needed to be updated so that workers have more of the information they need to make informed decisions and hold their leadership accountable. The Department of Labor's updated form requires the largest unions to:

- Separately report spending on contract negotiations and administration, organizing activities, political activities, and lobbying efforts, giving members greater visibility into how resources are allocated across core union functions.

- Provide more detailed reporting on major asset transactions, revenue sources, officer and employee compensation, benefits, and certain foreign financial transactions, including transaction-level disclosures that identify the source, purpose, amount, and parties involved.

- Provide workers with a clearer understanding of how their dues are being used and how union leadership manages the organization's financial resources.[15]

Remarkably, after the Department of Labor issued the new reporting form, the AFL-CIO sued to block it. The AFL-CIO, with a budget of nearly $181 million in 2025, claims that additional disclosures are "burdensome."[16] In reality, additional disclosures are necessary for giving workers greater transparency on how unions spend their members' hard-earned money. Workers

[15] Institute for the American Worker, "2026 Updated Labor Organization Annual Financial Reports — DOL Final Rulemaking," 2026, https://i4aw.org/regulation-watch/2026-updated-labor-organization-annual-financial-reports-dol-final-rulemaking/.

[16] AFL-CIO, "AFL-CIO Sues Trump Administration Over Illegal Reporting Requirements for Unions," June 11, 2026, https://aflcio.org/press/releases/afl-cio-sues-trump-administration-over-illegal-reporting-requirements-unions.

might be interested to know that the AFL-CIO spends more than 40 percent of its budget on politics and lobbying – by far its largest category – whereas less than a third of their budget is spent on unions' core purpose of organizing and representational activity.[17] Greater financial transparency would provide workers even more detail on how dues are being spent.

Union leaders also refuse to support the commonsense package of bills introduced in 2025 by members of the House Education and Workforce Committee. These bills would increase transparency for union members and accountability for union leaders:

- The Union Members Right to Know Act, H.R. 6139, would require unions to share key documents (like collective bargaining agreements and union constitutions and bylaws) with all union members. Unions must send these documents to members annually or post them online.[18]

- The Ask the Union Members Act, H.R. 6142, would require unions to hold a secret ballot vote before approving a new contract or authorizing a strike.[19]

---

[17] Center for Union Facts, "AFL-CIO Spending: Political Activities & Lobbying," n.d., accessed September 5, 2026, https://unionfacts.com/union/AFL-CIO/spending/Political_Activities_Lobbying/.
[18] Institute for the American Worker, "Union Members Right to Know Act (H.R. 6139)," 2025, accessed September 5, 2026, https://i4aw.org/resources/.
[19] Institute for the American Worker, "Ask the Union Members Act (H.R. 6142)," 2025, accessed September 5, 2026, https://i4aw.org/resources/.

- The Protecting Union Representation and Elections Act, H.R. 6136, would ensure union officers are elected via secret ballot by union members, instead of allowing delegates to do so.[20]

- The Fair Access to Justice for Union Members Act, H.R. 6141, would allow union members to defend their rights and go straight to court instead of having to exhaust the union's lengthy internal grievance processes first.[21]

No labor union has endorsed these bills, despite the obvious benefits for workers. Put simply, union leaders are not putting workers first when it comes to labor policy, or else they would support bills like these and the Employee Rights Act, which strengthen workers' rights, rather than the PRO Act or FLCA, which undermine workers' rights.

Worker Protections

Workers have a basic expectation that they will be protected from harassing or offensive speech. Unfortunately, union leaders have supported legal standards that shield abusive workplace misconduct during organizing campaigns. As the Institute for the American Worker has documented, unions and their allies have fought for special legal protection for vulgar, racist, sexist, and harassing speech when it occurs in the workplace in connection with unionization.[22]

---

[20] Institute for the American Worker, "Protecting Union Representation and Elections (PURE) Act (H.R. 6136)," 2025, accessed September 5, 2026, https://i4aw.org/resources/.
[21] Institute for the American Worker, "Fair Access to Justice for Union Members Act (H.R. 6141)," 2025, accessed September 5, 2026, https://i4aw.org/resources/.
[22] Matthew Mimnaugh, *Battle of the 7s Report: Lauren McFerran's Weaponization of NLRA Section 7 Against Title VII Civil Rights Protections, Allowing Racist and Sexist Harassment in the Workplace* (Institute for the American Worker, n.d.), accessed September 5, 2026, https://i4aw.org/reports/battle-of-the-7s-report/.

Union leaders secured this unfortunate carveout from the National Labor Relations Board in its 2023 *Lion Elastomers* decision.[23]

While union leaders point to Section 7 of the National Labor Relations Act to justify the use of vulgar, racist, sexist, and harassing speech, Title VII of the Civil Rights Act explicitly protects workers from discrimination and harassment. If union leaders truly represent workers' interests, they would protect against any language or conduct that is insulting, demeaning, and degrading toward workers—even if it happens during a unionization campaign. Unionization should never involve sacrificing the rights and safety of workers. The Employee Rights Act would reverse that Biden-era NLRB decision.

Nor should workers be stripped of their right to choose the work arrangements that are best for them. Unfortunately, union leaders support state and federal legislation that would restrict the ability of American workers to choose independent work by narrowing who can qualify as an independent contractor, including California's disastrous AB5 and the PRO Act in Congress.[24] Moving independent contractors into traditional employment would limit the very flexibility of independent work that makes it appealing to so many.

Workers don't support these union-backed restrictions. In the latest federal survey of independent contractors, 80.3 percent said they preferred their independent work arrangement, while only 8.3

---

[23] Although the Fifth Circuit later vacated *Lion Elastomers* on procedural grounds, it did not resolve the underlying legal standard, which remains unsettled. See *Lion Elastomers, L.L.C. v. NLRB*, 108 F.4th 252 (5th Cir. 2024), https://law.justia.com/cases/federal/appellate-courts/ca5/23-60270/23-60270-2024-07-09.html.

[24] Americans for Prosperity, "How Small Businesses Would Be Hurt by PRO Act's Attack on Independent Contracting," July 2, 2021, https://americansforprosperity.org/blog/pro-act-would-hurt-small-business/.

percent said they would prefer a traditional employment arrangement.[25] The Flex Association's 2026 State of the App-Based Economy Report found that 69 percent of app-based earners support maintaining independent contractor classification.[26] In seeking to restrict freelance work, union leaders are flatly ignoring the lived experience and preferences of tens of millions of workers.

At FREOPP, we seek to expand economic opportunity to those who least have it, using the tools of individual liberty, free enterprise, technological innovation, and pluralism. Independent work is often one of the most important pathways available to the people most in need of opportunity. It is how many people earn, stay attached to the labor market, and climb. When policymakers and union leaders try to narrow who may be an independent contractor, or make the classification itself a legal risk for the businesses that engage them, they hurt the workers who are least well-off, pulling up the ladder of opportunity.

Unions and the Economy

Ultimately, all of us share the goal of an economy that provides robust economic opportunity and upward mobility and allows for the essentials of life to be accessible and affordable. It is important to acknowledge that labor policy plays a role in accomplishing that, but not in the way that advocates of coercive unionism claim. In fact, increasing worker freedom can help make the economy more robust and more affordable.

[25] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Contingent and Alternative Employment Arrangements — July 2023," USDL-24-2267, November 8, 2024, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/conemp.pdf.
[26] Flex Association, *2026 State of the App-Based Economy Report* (2026), https://www.flexassociation.org/industry-impact/consumers-2/.

Unions plainly can provide benefits to the workers who belong to them. But the Bureau of Labor Statistics cautions that broad comparisons do not control for differences in occupation, industry, education, experience, or other characteristics. Policymakers should know that a higher level of earnings among union members does not mean that increasing unionization nationwide would produce the same gains for all workers.[27]

More importantly, the long-term decline in unionization has occurred alongside substantial growth in American living standards. The union membership rate was 20.1 percent in 1983, the first year of comparable Bureau of Labor Statistics data. By 2025, the rate had fallen to 10.0 percent. Private-sector unionization was just 5.9 percent.[28]

Yet American household incomes are substantially higher than they were when unionization was far more prevalent. According to the Census Bureau, median household income was $83,730 in 2024, compared to $58,630 in 1975, measured in 2024 dollars. That represents an increase of approximately 43 percent, or about $2,092 more per month for the median household.[29]

The gains extend across the income distribution. Between 1975 and 2024, average income increased in every household-income quintile – in the middle quintile, from $58,250 to $84,390. These gains do not mean that every household has prospered equally, nor that economic policy has no role in addressing hardship. They do demonstrate that the American economy has

---

[27] U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Union Members — 2025," USDL-26-0229, February 18, 2026, https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm.
[28] Ibid
[29] U.S. Census Bureau, *Income in the United States: 2024*, Current Population Reports P60-286 (September 2025), Table A-1, https://www.census.gov/library/publications/2025/demo/p60-286.html.

generated substantial improvements in material living standards even as union membership has declined sharply.

That holds true at the bottom of the income distribution. In 2024, just 1.8 percent of Americans aged 18 to 64 who worked full-time, year-round were below the official poverty line. By contrast, 28.2 percent of those who did not work were in poverty.[30] The data provide powerful evidence that employment and economic opportunity remain central to escaping poverty, and that expanding productive employment is more important to broad-based prosperity than simply increasing the power of labor organizations.

The evidence therefore does not support the claim that America's decline in unionization has rendered workers poorer or eliminated broad-based economic progress. Nor does it demonstrate that legislation restricting workers' freedom of choice or imposing greater costs and legal risks would produce higher wages or greater prosperity for the workforce as a whole.

In fact, an analysis by scholars at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University of 147 different studies found that union gains such as wage premiums are not a result of collective voice itself, but rather of the "statutory monopoly structures that amplify aggressive bargaining tactics," and that employers make trade-offs that result in slower employment growth and reduced investment and productivity – leaving workers worse off in the long-run.[31]

---

[30] Ibid

[31] Liya Palagashvili and Revana Sharfuddin, "Do More Powerful Unions Generate Better Pro-Worker Outcomes?" (Mercatus Working Paper, Mercatus Center at George Mason University, May 7, 2025), https://www.mercatus.org/research/working-papers/do-more-powerful-unions-generate-better-pro-worker-outcomes.

One particularly notable example Mercatus points to is that labor strife – not free trade – was responsible for more than half of the decline in the Rust Belt's share of manufacturing employment from 1950 to 2000.

By contrast, the Mercatus scholars note that systems permitting less hostile labor-management relations and greater worker flexibility retained the benefits of worker voice without the downsides of labor monopolies. They write:

> *These findings show no link between greater union power and increased worker welfare: It is the structure of representation—not the presence of a collective voice—that determines whether unions help or harm workers. Policy reforms that relax monopoly privileges for labor unions in the US and encourage pluralistic forms of worker voice and moderate demands could preserve the gains of collective bargaining while mitigating its unintended costs.*[32]

There is a legitimate role for unions in the American economy. Workers should be free to organize and bargain collectively when they believe doing so serves their interests, and unions should remain free to engage in policy and politics. But policymakers should distinguish between protecting those rights and expanding the coercive power of labor organizations.

Conclusion

There are many examples of union leaders ignoring workers' wishes, undermining workers' rights, and sacrificing workers' interests. One of the biggest reasons that union leaders are able to do so is that they almost never have to receive the approval of their own members. The Institute

---

[32] Ibid

for the American Worker found that in 2023 less than 5% of current private sector union members voted for the union that represents them.[33] Furthermore, in the 24 states without Right-to-Work laws, a private-sector worker who never voted for the union can still be required to pay dues as a condition of employment. No wonder union leaders do not feel the need to fully and faithfully represent workers—it isn't necessary to maintain their monopoly on representation.

The real power should be in workers' hands. American workers who choose union representation deserve meaningful transparency, democratic accountability, and a genuine voice in the decisions made on their behalf. Workers who choose not to join a union, who choose independent work, or who choose other lawful work arrangements deserve the same respect for their choices and the freedom to pursue them. The time has come for reforms that empower workers to rise and thrive in the 21st century economy.

Thank you for your commitment to giving workers the justice and power that are rightfully theirs.

---

[33] F. Vincent Vernuccio and Akash Chougule, *Unions Need Democracy* (Institute for the American Worker, September 2024), https://i4aw.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/I4AW-Report_Unions-Need-Democracy_Final-1.pdf.