

News Economy

Virginia the worst state for workers, report finds

By Keya Vakil · September 3, 2019 1:44 pm



Virginia is the worst state in the country for workers for the second year in a row, according to a new **report** from Oxfam, an organization working to end poverty.

In determining its ranking, OxFam studied wage policies, such as minimum wage laws; worker protection policies such as paid sick leave and protections around sexual harassment; and right to organize policies.

Virginia **earned** a 1.85 out of 100, significantly worse than the second-worst state, Mississippi, which scored 7.18 out of 100. In contrast, Washington D.C. topped the list, with a score of 96.76.

Virginia’s ‘worst state’ ranking comes less than two months after CNBC **ranked** it as the best state for business in the country.

Del. Lee Carter (D-Manassas) said the two rankings were connected. “What’s bad for workers is good for business,” Carter told **VPM**, citing Virginia’s loose campaign finance laws and “corporate interests” as the reason for Virginia’s weak worker protections. “We have essentially no protections for workers at all, except for what’s federally mandated,” Carter said.

Carter wasn’t the only Democrat to respond harshly to the report’s findings.



Virginia ranked dead last in the nation in the wage standard category, earning a 0 score due to the state’s \$7.25 per hour minimum wage, which is only 26.1% of the living wage for a family of four (\$27.83). The inability of localities in Virginia to raise the local minimum wage above the state rate also contributed to the state’s poor ranking.

The Commonwealth didn’t perform much better when it came to worker protection policies, ranking 49th in the country. Virginia’s score in this category was due to several factors, including the fact that state law does not provide accommodations for pregnant workers, does not provide paid family leave or paid sick leave, and does not restrict access to salary history to reduce gender and racial bias.

Virginia ranked 48th in the right to organize category due to its “right-to-work” law, which makes it illegal for unions to charge union dues to workers who receive the benefits of collective bargaining, but don’t want to be union members. In most states, unions can charge these workers a fee, but right-to-work laws ban that practice, meaning workers can earn the benefit of union contracts without paying for the cost of negotiating them.

Critics of right-to-work laws say they give workers less reason to pay their dues, thus weakening unions by making it more difficult for workers to negotiate for better wages and benefits.

Carter and other Democrats tried to raise the minimum wage and pass paid family leave and paid sick leave laws during the 2019 legislative session, but Republicans control the General Assembly and oppose such laws.

The report also found that higher-ranking states also had higher life expectancy, median income, and labor force participation, while having lower poverty and infant mortality rates.

The report’s authors concluded by calling on lawmakers to increase the minimum wage, improve protections for workers by guaranteeing paid sick leave and paid family leave, and repeal right-to-work laws.



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