

RESOLUTION 41: JUSTICE FOR VIRGINIA'S PUBLIC SERVICE WORKERS

WHEREAS:

The vast majority of Virginia public employees are denied the right to collectively bargain their terms and conditions of work, rights enjoyed by tens of millions of other public and private sector employees across the United States; and

WHEREAS:

Local government employees in the commonwealth made inroads toward righting this wrong when they won legislation in 2020 authorizing counties, cities, towns and school boards to adopt ordinances allowing collective bargaining for their employees, but these workers' collective bargaining rights remain subject to the whim of local elected officials; and

WHEREAS:

Virginia public employees, with their unions—the Virginia AFL-CIO, AFSCME, AFT, Communications Workers of America (CWA), Fire Fighters (IAFF), NEA, Service Employees International Union (SEIU), UNITE HERE and United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW)—have continued to join together to demand the freedom to collectively bargain that is not contingent on the preferences of elected officials but based solely on the choice of the workers themselves. In 2025, workers fought for and passed legislation providing full collective bargaining rights for state and local government employees, but the bill was vetoed by Gov. Glenn Youngkin; and

WHEREAS:

In the 2025 gubernatorial race, Gov. Abigail Spanberger campaigned on the promise to end this historic injustice and support legislation providing full collective bargaining rights for public employees in the commonwealth; and

WHEREAS:

During the 2026 legislative session, the Virginia General Assembly advanced collective bargaining legislation virtually identical to that passed in 2025 and vetoed by Gov. Youngkin. Throughout the 2026 process, Gov. Spanberger's administration sought multiple changes to the bill, which were agreed to by legislative leaders and accepted by the union coalition. The final bill reflected all the changes that the governor's team negotiated, and the General Assembly adopted the measure in March 2026; and

WHEREAS:

Rather than sign the legislation her team helped to draft and that she pledged to support, Gov. Spanberger on April 13 rejected the bill and offered a substitute measure full of poison-pill terms. The substitute delayed bargaining rights for local government employees to the year 2030, left critical provisions such as employers' duty to bargain, mandatory subjects of bargaining, negotiation timelines and union elections for a future labor board to decide, and replaced binding grievance and interest arbitration in case of impasse with advisory arbitration that either side could reject; and

WHEREAS:

The Virginia General Assembly on April 22 rejected the governor's unacceptable substitute measure and passed the original collective bargaining bill once more, giving the governor a second opportunity to keep her promise and support the workers who supported her. Instead, on May 14, the governor chose again to betray her commitment and veto the legislation; and

WHEREAS:

Virginia's history of anti-union legislation is inextricably tied to that of segregation and racism. The commonwealth passed its first measure opposing public sector collective bargaining in 1948 after union organizing by Black workers at the University of Virginia Hospital. A state supreme court ruling in 1977 and a statute passed in 1993 codified the ban on collective bargaining; and

WHEREAS:

Virginia has one of the worst pay gaps in the nation between public employees and their private sector counterparts, with its 25% gap attributable in large part to the lack of collective bargaining rights. Low pay driven by years of inadequate pay raises has made it difficult for the commonwealth to fill vacancies, producing a staffing crisis that is especially acute in safety-sensitive positions; and

WHEREAS:

Through her veto, the governor has denied more than a half-million public service workers the ability to bargain for fair pay, safe working conditions and better public services for all Virginians.

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED:

America's unions stand in solidarity with Virginia's public sector workers, who for decades have been denied a fundamental right enjoyed by tens of millions of American workers in the public and private sectors: the freedom to collectively bargain with the boss on a level playing field. This denial, along with the commonwealth's "right to work" law, embodies a legacy of racism and anti-worker ideology and remains an injustice today; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

The AFL-CIO condemns, in the strongest possible terms, Gov. Abigail Spanberger's veto of collective bargaining legislation that she had pledged to support and had helped to shape. Her betrayal is an affront not only to Virginia's public employees and of their unions—the Virginia AFL-CIO, AFSCME, AFT, CWA, IAFF, NEA, SEIU, UNITE HERE and UFCW—but to the entire labor movement and all working people. We will not forget the choice she has made; and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED:

The AFL-CIO thanks the pro-worker champions and legislative leaders in the Virginia General Assembly for their steadfast support for the commonwealth's public service workers in passing legislation providing genuine collective bargaining rights to Virginia public employees, and by rejecting a poison-pill substitute bill brought forward by the governor at the 11th hour; and

BE IT FINALLY RESOLVED:

Union members will keep fighting for Virginia's public sector workers: We will not rest until all state and local government employees in Virginia have the freedom to collectively bargain for fair pay, a safe workplace, fair treatment and a voice on the job. This fight is far from over.

[SUBMITTED BY THE AFL-CIO EXECUTIVE COUNCIL]