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Respect Work, Strengthen Family

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Today, as the nation struggles to regain its economic footing and security, millions of working families are struggling to make ends meet and to balance tough and competing demands at home and at work. Massive layoffs, stagnant pay and benefits and skyrocketing costs of such basic family necessities as health care and child care are eroding the gains many families made in the 1990s and threaten to consign many to economic insecurity now and in the future.

As a nation and as a movement, we have no more important goals—and challenges—than to build strong and stable families and the best-educated and most productive workforce in the world. These are not incompatible priorities. We can achieve both, but only if we are committed to each and are willing to dedicate the resources necessary to shore up families and the institutions that support them. This means, among other things, providing the assistance families need to help them shoulder their caregiving responsibilities. It means ensuring that work supports families, rather than subtracts from them. Supporting and strengthening families requires that we guarantee working families solid, life-long learning opportunities, including more and better options for high-quality early education and child care, stronger public schools and greater access to higher education and to job training and skills development programs.

The union movement has a powerful role to play in strengthening families—on the shop floor, at the bargaining table, in the voting booth and before elected officials. We are committed to fighting for policies, programs and practices that support and sustain families and to fighting against those that weaken families, such as tax cuts that deplete resources we could invest in families or budget cuts or legislative proposals that dilute worker protections and job training programs and strip resources away from our public schools.

In Families, More Workers Working More

One of the most dramatic workforce changes over the past three decades is the increased participation of women. In 2000, nearly 64 million women were in the workforce—46 percent of all workers. Women's share of the workforce is projected to reach 48 percent in 2008. Today, six out of every 10 mothers of children younger than 3 are in the paid labor force, as are nearly three out of four (73 percent) with children younger than 18.

Women's stepped-up labor force participation is reflected in the greater likelihood today than in past years that in most families with children, both parents—or the only parent in single-parent households—work outside the home. Among families with children younger than 18, both parents are working in two-thirds of married-couple families. And in single-parent households, in which more than a quarter of all children now live (up from 20 percent in 1980), 76 percent of mothers and 86 percent of fathers are in the paid labor force.

Indeed, a greater share of the working-age population is employed in the United States than in almost any rich, industrialized country (only Japan exceeds the United States in this respect, and that is only among men). And workers in the United States put in more work hours than workers in other industrialized countries. In 2000, the average worker in this country put in 1,978 hours, up from 1,942 hours in 1990, an increase of 36 hours—almost a week of work. An international analysis found that workers employed in this country are putting in nearly 49.5 weeks a year on the job. Workers in Japan worked 137 fewer hours; in England, 260 fewer hours; and in Germany, 499 fewer hours than their counterparts in the United States. Through-out the 1990s, work hours in the United States rose steadily while falling in other industrialized countries. And some nations have legislated limits on weekly work hours.

Families are strained not only by the time crunch resulting from their increased work hours but also by the pressures of working odd hours and schedules. More than one in four working women, including those with children younger than 18, put in at least part of their working hours in the evenings or on weekends. Nearly half of all women who are married or living with someone say they work a schedule different from that of their spouse or domestic partner. While parents often work different shifts so they can share child care duties (and save child care costs), the conflicting hours put added strains on families, robbing them of time together.

America's working families are reaching their limits on work hours. Long work hours and lack of control over work schedules because of mandatory overtime are serious problems for many workers, wreaking havoc on their

personal and family lives. Nearly three-fourths of working adults report they have little or no control over their work schedules. Apart from the personal toll, excessive work hours raise serious health and safety concerns in many industries, notably in the health care field, where risks associated with fatigue threaten both workers and patients. But long shifts and involuntary overtime contribute to excessive fatigue experienced by workers throughout the workforce.

The union movement is committed to helping workers achieve and maintain greater control over their hours of work. Through high-profile strikes and other work actions, unions have elevated the profile and importance of the issue of excessive work hours. Unions also have bargained contract provisions that provide a right to refuse overtime, impose caps on overtime hours, require employers to assign overtime on a voluntary basis, provide additional pay premiums for excessive overtime and include language addressing staffing issues. In addition, unions are leading the fight before state legislatures and Congress to help workers win legal protections against excessive hours and mandatory overtime. We will maintain these efforts to win key protections for workers and give them more control at work and more time at home.

Multigenerational Caregiving Crisis

Longer work hours compound the difficulties workers confront in trying to work and provide care for their children or aging adult family members. Caregiving responsibilities are becoming even more difficult at a time when other supports for families are decreasing. Too many workers who no longer can count on the stable health and retirement security benefits they once enjoyed, for example, must work longer hours to buy an additional measure of security. The AFL-CIO and its affiliates will work to secure greater workplace and public support to help working families meet their caregiving needs.

Cost and quality pose significant obstacles to finding satisfactory child care arrangements. The primary source of federal funding for subsidized child care, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, is limited to poor and near-poor families, and even among them the program serves only 10 to 15 percent of eligible children. Most families that have left the welfare system are working but are not receiving child care subsidies. Less than one-fifth of all workers even have access to child care resource and referral services, which help in locating child care but do not provide financial support to pay for it. Nearly half of working families with children younger than 13 have child care expenses, and these costs range from an average of 9 percent of earnings for two-parent families to 16 percent for single-parent families. Among low-income families with child care costs the burden is worse, with two-parent

families spending 16 percent of their earnings and single-parent families spending 19 percent on child care.

Early childhood education (discussed in more detail later in this resolution) and the quality of care have a profound impact on children's social and cognitive development. Children who attend quality programs have better language and math skills as well as better classroom social and thinking skills from the preschool years into elementary school. Yet high-quality programs are in short supply, in part because state requirements are limited and monitoring is lax.

Child care quality is affected by a number of factors, including the training, skill and experience of providers as well as the continuity of children's care—a particularly serious problem. The turnover rate among child care workers is more than one-third annually, much higher than the turnover rate for public school teachers, even though the demand for child care workers is great and will increase significantly in the future. Jobs in the child care services industry are projected to grow 32 percent from 1998 to 2008, more than double the rate of job growth projected for the economy as a whole.

Low pay is the main cause of high turnover among child care providers. These workers struggle to provide the best care possible, but with wages hovering near the poverty level many simply cannot afford to stay in the field. Others find it financially impossible to invest in improving their skills and training. Providing a living wage for child care workers is critical to retaining and improving the child care workforce and improving the quality of early childhood education. But it's mainly parents who finance child care programs. With budgets stretched thin already, working parents simply cannot solve the dilemma of low pay for child care workers on their own.

Even fewer supports are available for working families caring for elderly loved ones, although the U.S. population overall is aging, people are living longer and most elderly persons do not reside in nursing homes. More than 54 million adults are providing some degree of care for an elderly, disabled or chronically ill family member or friend. The responsibility of providing such care can take an enormous workplace toll on these informal caregivers. Nearly one-third of working adults with elderly parents report having missed work to care for them. The burdens are especially great for low-income working families: Very low-income workers are twice as likely as those in upper income groups to provide 30 hours or more of unpaid elder care each month.

Formal caregivers for the elderly and people with disabilities experience many of the same workplace problems as child care providers. Whether providing care in the home of clients—as home care or home health care workers—or in institutions such as nursing homes, caregivers for the elderly

are typically underpaid, seldom receive benefits, enjoy little or no job security and often are at risk of work-related injuries (from lifting and bathing their clients, for example). Many caregivers for the elderly and people with disabilities are dedicated to their clients and work as hard as they know how to provide the best care and services they can. These workers provide invaluable services to their clients, the families of their clients and society overall. They, too, deserve decent wages and benefits and reasonable and fair working conditions.

We cannot solve the national crisis of caregiving unless we are willing, as a nation, to make greater public and private investments in helping working families meet their caregiving needs, and helping working caregivers earn a decent living doing jobs they love that we all need them to do. The AFL-CIO and its affiliates pledge to step up our efforts to win these investments and to boost public and employer support for workers who are struggling to meet their care-giving responsibilities. We will fight for new resources to boost child care workers' pay and to reward workers for education and training. We will help child care workers gain a voice at work by organizing into unions. We will bargain and lobby for programs such as career and wage ladders that link the acquisition of skills and training to promotions and higher wages. In organizing, bargaining and the policymaking arena, we will work to upgrade the quality of long-term care and to improve wages and other terms of employment for long-term care workers.

We will bargain for increased employer contributions to help workers secure access to affordable and high-quality care for their children, the elderly and loved ones with disabilities. We also will seek to expand and replicate the many successful work and family model programs and provisions we have negotiated. Many of these are worksite-based, including state-of-the-art child care facilities operating around the clock, worksite-based work-family representatives and intergenerational family care centers (at or away from the worksite). These programs provide important supports for many working families and serve as excellent examples of the types of support all families need and should receive.

Strengthening Families by Respecting Work

Workers can do their best, most productive jobs at work if their employers support them in doing their best jobs at home, too. To this end, workers need jobs and workplaces that are fair and that provide genuine flexibility. This means secure jobs that pay good wages and benefits, workplaces that are not only family-friendly but also family-supporting and employers who treat workers with dignity and who respect workers' rights.

It also means we must strengthen and maintain a solid safety net to support families when they fall on hard times or when they no longer are working. Unfortunately, what workers feel they need on the job doesn't match what they get. More than two-thirds of workers say workplace rights need more protection. Most say improvements are needed in their own job situations. A majority feels that employers inspire little or no trust that they will treat employees fairly. And growing numbers of workers say corporate power is out of control. Plainly, much more needs to be done to respect work and, in the process, to strengthen families.

One step in the right direction is to make work pay. The union movement supports a number of initiatives on this front, include raising the minimum wage, which is particularly important for women and low-income families, and passing living wage measures, which help raise wages and improve working conditions for many minority and immigrant families. Unions also have fought tirelessly to protect the nation's core wage and hour protections, such as mandatory overtime pay. These laws are particularly important for low-wage workers and for workers who do not enjoy the protections of a collective bargaining agreement. The AFL-CIO reaffirms its support and commitment to both the Davis-Bacon and Service Contract Acts. These laws help ensure worker fairness and equity in the construction and service sectors.

Ending wage discrimination against women and people of color is another way to raise wages, respect work and strengthen families. Nearly four decades after passage of the Equal Pay Act and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, the wages of women and people of color still trail those of white men. While many factors account for these wage gaps, discrimination in pay and terms and conditions of employment are significant culprits. This discrimination does not only harm its immediate victims. Instead, equal pay for women and people of color is a family issue. Discrimination against women and people of color reduces their families' incomes; ending pay bias will boost families' incomes and benefits.

The AFL-CIO and its affiliates are committed to erasing wage discrimination for working women and people of color. The union movement has been in the forefront of efforts to pass every major civil rights, women's rights and equal pay measure designed to end discrimination, erase the wage gap and expand employment rights and opportunities. Unions also have used their power at the bargaining table and in courtrooms across the nation to challenge and eliminate discriminatory wage differences. Through our bargaining, lobbying and litigation, we will continue to fight to end wage discrimination.

Another way to respect work and strengthen families is for employers to provide genuine workplace flexibility. This means providing workers with a

voice in choosing work schedules or permitting alternatives to the traditional 9-to-5 workday such as flexible work hours, compressed workweeks, shift swaps and telecommuting. Alternatives such as these give workers greater control and predictability, helping them plan for and attend to family needs more effectively without losing time from the job or suffering pay cuts.

Flexible work schedules can be an important work-family benefit, but they are not universally available. And such policies are most often available only for more highly paid employees. One study found that flextime is available to nearly two-thirds (62 percent) of those with incomes of more than \$71,000 but to less than one-third (31 percent) of working parents with incomes less than \$28,000. In other words, the very workers who most need supportive workplace policies to help them meet their family responsibilities are least likely to have them. The union movement believes all working families should have access to workplace options designed to ease the burdens of combining family and work. Low-wage workers do not owe their families less just because they earn less; nor should they have less access than more highly paid employees to workplace alternatives that help them juggle work and family responsibilities.

The need for and desirability of genuine flexibility, however, should not become a smoke screen for radical rollbacks of workers' rights, such as comp time proposals that would end the right to overtime pay and the 40-hour workweek. In reality, such proposals provide no real flexibility for workers—they just maximize employer flexibility. The AFL-CIO will fight to secure genuine job flexibility and will resist all efforts to repeal overtime laws.

Other alternative work arrangements that can promote greater flexibility and help workers balance their demands on the job with those at home are part-time, temporary and on-call arrangements. But too many workers are in these arrangements not because they chose them but because of unilateral decisions by employers or workers' inability to obtain permanent, full-time jobs. Whether these arrangements are voluntary or not, workers in them typically earn less and receive fewer employer-provided benefits than similar workers in full-time, permanent positions. The AFL-CIO and its affiliates believe the only way to ensure these workers are not exploited, and that working in these arrangements is truly a matter of choice, is to extend equal pay and fair benefits to part-timers and others in nonstandard work arrangements.

In addition to fair pay and benefits and genuine flexibility on the job, workers must have the right to take leave during times of personal or family illness or to care for newborns and newly adopted children without worrying about job security. The AFL-CIO and its affiliates were leaders in the fight for passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) of 1993, which provides such rights

and protections for certain employees. More than 35 million workers have benefited from taking leave for family and medical reasons since 1993.

Despite the value and importance of the FMLA, it has serious shortcomings that must be addressed to extend its benefits to more workers and to make its protections more meaningful for all. Because the law only applies to workplaces with 50 or more employees, almost 41 million workers—more than 40 percent of the private-sector workforce—are not covered. Workplaces covered under the FMLA are also more likely to provide other types of paid leave such as sick leave and other work-family benefits such as child care assistance—so excluding smaller employers from the FMLA only adds insult to injury for their employees.

Another significant shortcoming of the FMLA is that it provides only for unpaid leave. The United States is the only industrialized nation that fails to provide paid family leave benefits with a guaranteed right to return to work. More than three in four employees (78 percent) who have needed to take FMLA-covered leave but declined to do so report they could not afford unpaid leave. Although low-wage workers are especially unlikely to benefit from this work-family protection because they cannot afford unpaid leave, researchers report that children in low-income families are more likely than others to experience health problems for which they need parental care.

The union movement believes one way to help workers meet their family obligations is by expanding the FMLA so more workers are better able to meet their families' needs without compromising income or job security. With the leadership and active participation of state labor federations, campaigns are under way in many states to win paid family leave benefits for working families. Nearly half of all states already provide more family leave protection than federal law affords, such as extending coverage to employees of smaller businesses or making leave available more broadly than under the FMLA. Unions also have bargained for paid family and medical leave for their members. In the future, we will continue to bargain for family and medical leave benefits and for passage of state and federal laws that provide greater protections for workers during periods of family need.

Finally, we can strengthen families immeasurably by making sure we maintain strong and durable safety net protections for workers and their families to fall back on during times of need or when they are no longer in the workforce. This means, for example, providing reliable and adequate unemployment insurance benefits to all workers who lose their jobs. Today, only about one-third of jobless workers collect benefits, and their benefits replace only about one-third of their lost income. Many of the workers who

fall outside this important safety net program are women, people of color and low-wage earners. We must modernize the unemployment insurance system to make it more responsive to all workers' needs if the program is to serve its important purpose of shoring up families during periods of economic downturn.

Similarly, we should invest more in public programs designed to provide health care coverage for low-wage working families, which account for most of the uninsured in the United States, and we should work to arrest the erosion of employment-based health coverage. We need to protect and strengthen Social Security, which stands as the only buffer against poverty for millions of elderly Americans and for millions of working families whose principal wage earner has died or become disabled. And we need to strengthen Medicare to help guarantee that skyrocketing medical costs do not bankrupt our nation's seniors and their families. Working families contribute to these safety net programs through the taxes they pay or the deductions their employers take from their paychecks. We must ensure, in turn, that these programs are there when working families need them.

Supporting Families With Solid Investments in Public Education

Families and the home are the first and foremost institutions shaping the lives and opportunities of children. The workplace contributes to—or can detract from—what families can give to children. In addition, public schools have a powerful role to play in fortifying families, in boosting children's achievement and opportunities to succeed in life and in building strong communities and a strong nation. Healthy families and a healthy national public school system go hand in hand. We cannot strengthen America's working families while depriving our schools of the resources needed to educate children, not only in the ABCs but also in the very values that have made our society the most democratic and the most prosperous on Earth.

Education is a lifelong process that begins in early childhood. Research shows that early childhood, in particular the first three years of life, is a period of unparalleled growth and development. A child's development in those early learning years affects school readiness and also can set the stage for later learning. The benefits persist throughout the school years. Children who attend early childhood education programs are less likely to be placed in special education classes or retained in grade. Early childhood education programs also have been shown to reduce dropout and delinquency rates for children at risk of academic failure.

Remarkably, half of the children in the United States have one or more risk factors that can jeopardize school success. Poor children are at a particular disadvantage. While schools in poor school districts have made great progress in raising student achievement, the gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged children remain unacceptably large, and public investments in education have been grossly inadequate to close these gaps. One way to help ease these inequities is to guarantee that every child has the opportunity to enroll in an affordable, high-quality early childhood education program. Too few children, however, are in quality programs. Only three states require preschool programs to meet Head Start Performance Standards; only six require programs to be nationally accredited. Just slightly more than half of the states require preschool teachers to have teaching credentials (ranging from a Child Development Associate degree to teacher certification at the pre-kindergarten level). One recent study found that fewer than one in 10 infant classrooms and just less than one-quarter of preschool classrooms were of good or excellent quality.

We believe it is long past time for the nation and states to invest significant resources in making affordable, high-quality, noncumpulsory preschool programs universally available to all children in the United States. Universally available, high-quality and affordable preschool education for 3- and 4-year-olds would prepare many children for a solid start in school and help ensure later academic success. Universal preschool also would help working families meet some of their caregiving challenges. To succeed, preschool programs would need adequate funding, credentialed teachers and adequate quality assurances including solid curricula, appropriate performance measures and a voice at work for teachers and child care workers. One option is to build out from the existing Head Start program, which was created to serve the nation's poor children and their families, but additional models also are worth exploring.

Other nations have chosen to invest in their young children in this manner. Young children in France, for example, have access to very low-cost preschool programs in which their teachers must meet the same educational requirements and receive the same pay as elementary school teachers. The question is not whether there is a way to make universal, affordable, high-quality, noncompulsory preschool education available in the United States, too; the only question is whether we have the national will to do so. We believe that failing to make this investment shortchanges not only our children and their futures, but our nation's future as well.

The union movement has a long-standing and unwavering commitment to universal and free K-12 public education. But public schools and public school teachers and educators are in a tough spot. Often expected to do more

with less, the nation's educators are subject to relentless attack from the right and, occasionally, the left. Nevertheless, public education enjoys broad public support: More than nine out of 10 parents of public school children say public education is a basic right; roughly the same share say they are satisfied with their children's schools; and eight of 10 say the public school system is working. Education consistently ranks at the top of Americans' national priorities.

The AFL-CIO wholeheartedly endorses efforts to strengthen the nation's public schools—and just as adamantly opposes attempts to weaken them. We support high standards of academic achievement for students and for teachers and other educators. Standards must be solid, clear and specific, and they must adequately inform parents, teachers and other educators and students about what children need to know. Schools must have adequate resources to prepare students to meet the standards. Tests to measure achievement must be aligned with curriculum and standards and must be designed and administered competently. And students failing to satisfy the standards must have access to appropriate remedial support. In a standards-based system, it is unfair and unreasonable to expect students to succeed if the system itself fails them.

High-quality teaching is the single most important ingredient in improving students' performance. If we are to attract and retain the best teachers and educators, especially in today's competitive marketplace, we must guarantee a salary commensurate with their education and experience and the challenging and complex tasks they perform. Reasonable measures designed to assess teacher quality are also critical. As is true of standards for students, however, licensing and certification requirements for teachers vary considerably among the states. Some are set too low to ensure teachers have mastered subject matter or acquired necessary pedagogic skills.

The union movement supports solid licensing and certification requirements for teachers, as well as voluntary national certification. As the front-line officers in the nation's efforts to educate children, teachers, educators and their unions must be active players in setting and enforcing standards for the profession. Teachers must have access to high-quality professional development and mentoring programs to help them meet standards, meaningful evaluations to determine how well they measure up, assistance in correcting deficiencies and, when necessary, fair, timely intervention and dismissal procedures.

Students, teachers and educators need additional supports to improve their opportunity and capacity to learn and to teach. Among these are reduced class sizes. Students in smaller classes perform better, especially in the lower grades, and the advantages associated with smaller class sizes persist all the way through high school. The positive effects are greatest for minority and inner-city school

children. The AFL-CIO supports increased investments in schools to help reduce class sizes.

The union movement will continue to fight to see that schools serving disadvantaged students receive the resources they need to deal with the many challenges their students face. Critical federal education programs, such as Head Start and the Title I program for disadvantaged students, are underfunded and, as a result, serve only a fraction of eligible children. Lower income students also have limited access to enriching summer and after-school programs, which hold great promise for improving student achievement. The nation must not stint in providing these children with the resources and opportunities they need today to help them secure brighter futures for tomorrow.

Education is more than bricks and mortar, but bricks and mortar matter. Overcrowded, run-down schools make it harder for teachers to teach and for students to learn. As local school districts across the country struggle to accommodate rapidly rising enrollments, many public schools are being forced to set up classrooms in trailers, hallways and closets. A stunning proportion of the nation's public school infrastructure is in need of repair. The average public school in America is 42 years old, and nearly half of all public school buildings lack the basic wiring necessary to give our children access to communications. The federal General Accounting Office estimates it will cost \$185 billion over 10 years to rehabilitate and modernize the nation's public schools. In addition, with enrollment rising, the U.S. Education Department estimates local school districts will need to build 6,000 new schools by 2006 simply to keep up. And record enrollments are projected to continue increasing at least through 2018.

The AFL-CIO and its affiliates will fight for greater resources to rebuild, repair and rewire the nation's public school system. We know that the best way to ensure high-quality renovation of our schools is with skilled, experienced craftspeople, and we believe that public dollars should support community wage standards, not undermine them. Thus, we will work to ensure that prevailing wage standards apply to workers charged with the task of rebuilding the public school infrastructure. And, to ensure the continued availability of skilled craftspeople, all school construction should require that contractors participate in registered Bureau of Apprenticeship and Training (BAT) or state apprenticeship council (SAC) labor/management apprenticeship programs.

The union movement opposes private school vouchers, tuition tax credits and other strategies designed to move public resources out of public education into private schools or the hands of private profiteers. Private school vouchers take scarce public funds away from public schools, which are open to all students and which must meet accountability standards, and shift them to

private schools, which can exclude students for many reasons (including inability to pay) and which operate relatively free of accountability. Fifty million children, nearly 90 percent of all students in grades K–12, attend the nation’s public schools. We believe public resources are best and most fairly spent serving those children, rather than shifting any share away from them into private schools. We are convinced the only way to provide every child in America with an equal opportunity to receive a high-quality education is through adequate funding and real support for our public schools—not through piecemeal subsidies that would benefit a few at the expense of many. The AFL-CIO will fight every effort to siphon funds away from public schools.

Making higher education more accessible and affordable for those who desire it is critical for workers and their families. The “college wage premium,” the pay premium associated with higher education, exploded in the 1980s and has been steady for women since then and strong for men in the past few years. Higher education is no guarantee of job security and good wages and benefits, but workers with only high school diplomas (or less) almost invariably find their opportunities for advancement severely limited—and their economic security often is tenuous. Cuts in state support for public colleges and universities and increases in tuition and fees at both public and private institutions threaten working families’ access to higher education. Colleges and universities are growing ever more stratified by family income, leaving too many students with only the options of abandoning college or assuming excessive debt that limits their life and career choices. The recent economic slowdown will make it even harder for children in working families to attend college or for workers to start or return to school.

The AFL-CIO supports programs designed to enhance working families’ access to higher education, such as employer-provided tuition assistance and the exclusion of such aid from income taxation. We will bargain for these and related benefits for our members and their families and advocate for other policies and programs that will facilitate access to higher education for all.

Strengthening Families Through Worker Education and Skills Development Opportunities

Securing the future for working families depends on having access to training and education—and then access to jobs that pay well and have good benefits. As the economic impacts of September’s devastating terrorist attacks have multiplied, it is particularly important that affected workers have access to education and training, as well as income support and health care, so they can begin to rebuild their lives, their families and their communities.

Unions have long been a major force in workplace education programs. Joint training programs by construction trades, teachers', industrial, service and other unions rival the nation's community college system, ranking second only to the U.S. military in workplace education. These programs deliver education, training and learning that are tied to high standards, lead to useful credentials and meet labor market needs. Just as working people and their unions fought for the good jobs many have today, unions must continue to be a strong voice in the education, training and economic development systems in their communities.

The Workforce Investment Act (WIA) presents significant challenges and opportunities for the union movement. This legislation provides tools to states and communities faced with economic dislocation and workplace change. To work effectively, this system must be universally available, publicly administered and fully funded. With union participation, WIA can become a tool for developing high-wage, high-skill jobs. Without union involvement, it may become nothing more than a vehicle for low-wage employers looking for subsidies and yet another fatally flawed federal job training program.

Unions are committed to strengthening the nation's workforce development and job training service delivery infrastructure. We will continue to oppose any effort to privatize our public delivery systems. We will support a central role for the State Employment Service and Unemployment Insurance systems as key components of a comprehensive workforce development system. We also will persist in advocating for funding levels sufficient to meet the re-employment and retraining needs of all workers in the United States.

The AFL-CIO and its affiliates are committed to working in every appropriate forum to ensure implementation of our nation's workforce development system in ways that help assure a high-road approach to employment, training and economic development. Building that high road means retaining and building family-sustaining jobs; turning bad jobs into good ones that call on workers to use increased skills; connecting poor, unemployed and underemployed workers to good jobs and career ladders; and supporting high-road companies that compete on the basis of skill and innovation and that create family-sustaining jobs. Developing the skills of the nation's workforce is key to our future prosperity and to our national security. We cannot afford to be penny-wise and pound-foolish. We must, instead, invest the resources needed to get the job done. Regrettably, rather than more spending on job training programs, funding cuts are in the works. The union movement will make every effort to restore full funding for these programs and to win new investments in the future.

In addition to our public workforce development systems, the AFL-CIO will continue to support the collective bargaining process to build career paths and secure education and training for our members. The registered apprenticeship system is perhaps the nation's most respected training system and is an excellent example of union-management cooperation in training that should be recognized and supported fully. Additionally, innovative contracts have guaranteed basic skills education and retraining as new skills become necessary. These agreements have served as the foundation for high-road partnerships with signatory employers. Unions have a unique understanding of the skill requirements of jobs, which should be brought to bear in developing skill standards and quality training in our workforce development system.

While the workforce investment system proposes a more "market-oriented" approach to education and training, it is vitally important that proven education and training providers—our nation's registered apprenticeship programs, community colleges and other post-secondary institutions as well as community-based organizations—continue to participate in delivering high-quality education and training. We also will continue to support and work to build the labor movement's own pre-eminent programs to enhance union members' skills development and education opportunities: the Working for America Institute (WAI) and the George Meany Center for Labor Studies and its National Labor College. The WAI works to build union leadership and organizational capacity to make unions more effective partners in state, local and regional economics and to help bring high-road employers to the workforce system. The National Labor College provides union members, staff and officers with broad opportunities for education and training through noncredit and degree programs as well as curriculum development assistance for labor educators.

The AFL-CIO, its affiliate unions, state federations and central labor councils will work to ensure the union movement is fully involved in the design and delivery of education and training programs to assure that workers have access to a broad range of workforce development services, that programs are worker-centered and that training leads to career growth and family-sustaining jobs.

America's working families are working more than ever and harder than ever. Strengthening working families can best be accomplished through public investments that will benefit working families, not tax cuts for the wealthiest among us. Good jobs with real workplace protections that are vigorously enforced, first-rate public schools and well-funded and forward-looking job training and skills development programs are what working families need and deserve.

Failing to provide these vital programs, protections and investments shortchanges our workforce, our economy and—perhaps most important—our children. No investment we make as a nation is more critical than our investments in our children; no protections we extend to workers are more important than those that will help them do their jobs as parents. Our children are our most important assets. We must do all we can as a nation and as a movement to support children and their families today, to help prepare them for the opportunities and challenges they will shoulder tomorrow.

To that end, the AFL-CIO and its affiliates will fight to expand family and medical leave protections for all workers; to lighten working families' caregiving burdens and to improve wages and working conditions for caregivers; to raise wages for workers at the bottom; to win genuine flexibility for workers without sacrificing important rights and protections; to protect and strengthen our basic safety net programs; and to improve the nation's education and training system, both in the workplace and in public schools, to meet the needs of working families today and in the future.

Union members believe that workplace practices and public policies should respect work and strengthen families. In the future as in the past, we will work for public and private policies and practices that help workers do the best job they can at home and at work.