



Economic
Policy
Institute

EARNCon2024

**Virtual
Conference
Program Book**

Table of Contents

Session titles are linked to take you to the description and speaker bios for each session/plenary
All times are Eastern Standard (ET)

Thursday, September 12	
11:00 am – 12:00 pm	Exploring the Power of Procurement
	Defending Public Schools
1:00 – 2:00 pm	PREE Plenary Session: Facts, Fiction and Countering the Anti-DEI Backlash
3:00 – 4:00 pm	State and Local Strategies for Empowering Immigrants
	Translating Federal Infrastructure & Clean Energy Investments into Good Jobs
4:00 – 5:00 pm	EARN Advancing Econ Justice for Children & Families Cohort Meeting (AEJCF Grantees only)

Friday, September 13	
11:00 am – 12:00 pm	More Than a Red State Problem: Addressing the Spread of Anti-Worker Legislation
	How the Contemporary Economy Shapes the Fight for the Minimum Wage
1:00 – 2:00 pm	Plenary Session: Seizing the Organizing Moment



**Economic
Policy
Institute**

A core part of the Economic Policy Institute (EPI), [EARN](#) is a growing network of nearly 60 research, policy, and advocacy organizations in 45 states and the District of Columbia.

We are the progressive economic policy and research infrastructure in the states—conducting research, providing data analysis, and developing and advocating for policies that prioritize racial and gender equity and confront fundamental power imbalances in the workplace to create an economy that works for everyone. We believe that centering Black and Brown workers, women, and other historically underrepresented groups is essential to creating a just economy.

We create a community that brings together researchers, advocates, the labor movement, grassroots and community leaders, and policymakers at every level of government to design smart, equity-enhancing policies; identify and share best practices; learn what works; and build cross-state momentum for progressive, worker-centered economic change.

Our Values

RESEARCH: Substance, data, and facts matter. We produce rigorous economic research and policy analysis that grassroots organizations, advocates, journalists, and policymakers rely upon for a clear-eyed understanding of economic conditions and policy options in the states.

POWER: Fundamental imbalances in market power and political representation must be addressed through smart public policy, worker organizing, and collective bargaining. We believe responsive government and collective action are essential to ensuring economic security for all people. We believe that solidarity among workers through unions helps to protect workers' rights, improve job quality, and strengthen democracy.

JUSTICE: We fight for justice because economic outcomes should not be determined by race, gender, immigration status, ability, or zip code. We believe that economic policymaking should intentionally advance worker, racial, and gender justice. We believe that achieving equity requires explicitly confronting systemic racism, sexism, ableism, and xenophobia and that policy choices should be guided by the communities they affect.

[Dave Cooper, Director of EARN](#)

[Jennifer Sherer, Acting Deputy Director of EARN | Director, State Worker Power Initiative](#)

[Chandra Childers, EARN in the South Economic Analyst](#)

[Emma Cohn, Research Assistant](#)

[Dave Kamper, Senior State Policy Strategist](#)

[Sebastian Martinez Hickey, State Economic Analyst](#)

[Nina Mast, Policy and Economic Analyst](#)

[Jasmine Payne-Patterson, Senior State Policy Strategist](#)

[Daniel Perez, State Economic Analyst](#)

[EPI and the Program on Race, Ethnicity, and the Economy \(PREE\)](#)

The Program on Race, Ethnicity, and the Economy (PREE) at EPI explores and explains how race, ethnicity, and class intersect to affect economic outcomes in the United States.

PREE's frequently cited research and policy analysis demonstrate that large racial and ethnic disparities in unemployment, wages, income, poverty, and wealth have persisted over generations; differ by class and gender; and are rooted in policy choices—including the failure to enact needed policies. By interpreting broad economic trends and policies through the lenses of race, ethnicity, and gender, PREE bolsters EPI's mission to use research and policy analysis to advance policy solutions that ensure truly equitable and broadly shared prosperity and opportunity in the United States.

[Valerie Wilson, Director, Program on Race, Ethnicity, and the Economy](#)

[Ismael Cid Martinez, Economist](#)

[Stevie Marvin, Research Assistant](#)

[Adewale Maye, Policy and Research Analyst](#)

[Kyle Moore, Economist](#)

Thursday, September 12

Sessions:

11:00 am – 12:00 pm

Exploring the Power of Procurement

Local and state governments spend an estimated \$2 trillion to procure goods and services every year. Given the immense amount of public money transferred to the private sector through government contracting, it is crucial that local and state governments use a values-based approach to procurement that drives toward equity. We will explore how procurement can be reformed to reflect progressive values both in the process and resulting contracts. This approach can help procurement serve as a multi-faceted tool that can help government tackle pressing issues, such as the undermining of support of public services, eroding economic security and worker power, racial inequities, climate change, and more.

Speakers:

Teresa Mosqueda, King County Councilmember

Mosqueda is a progressive leader who has dedicated her career to improving the lives of working people across Washington state. She has united labor, business, housing, transportation and environmental groups to pass policy that has buoyed the local economy. Mosqueda served two terms on the Seattle City Council, where she doubled investments in affordable housing, improved worker standards for domestic workers and hotel workers, and ensured sick leave for drivers. She served for almost a decade at the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO. Mosqueda advocated for legislation to improve labor standards, protect immigrant rights, and promote health care for all.

Anna Smith, Senior Researcher & Policy Coordinator, Jobs to Move America

Anna Smith is a Senior Researcher & Policy Coordinator for JMA's National team where she supports advocacy efforts to raise labor standards and tracks federal infrastructure and green energy investments. Anna's background is in federal labor and workforce development policy, focusing on prioritizing policy to build worker power. Prior to joining JMA Anna was a researcher at The Roosevelt Institute where she focused on worker equity and cracking down on corporate monopsony. Anna is receiving her Masters in Labor Studies at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, where she focuses on the labor movement and how to build workers' power in the political economy.

Moderator:

Shar Habibi, Research and Policy Director, In the Public Interest

For the last 15 years, Shar Habibi has served as the Research and Policy Director for In the Public Interest, a national nonprofit research and policy organization that studies public goods and services. In the Public Interest helps community organizations, advocacy groups, public officials, researchers, and the general public understand how the privatization of public goods impacts service quality, democracy, equity, and government budgets. The organization also advocates for reclaiming and building popular support for public institutions that work for all of us.

[Defending Public Schools](#)

This session will talk about the organizing, research, and advocacy work being done to fight school voucher programs across the country. Panelists will highlight recent campaign wins and discuss the most promising approaches for research on vouchers that can be used in state-level fights.

Speakers:

[Damaris Allen, Executive Director, Families for Strong Public Schools](#)

Damaris Allen is a product of Hillsborough County Public Schools and the proud mother of a HCPS graduate and a HCPS student. She began her advocacy journey when she registered her oldest child for kindergarten and discovered her neighbors were opting out of sending their children to their neighborhood public school. Instead of pulling her child from her the school she decided to focus her efforts on working with parents, teachers, and the administrators to improve the school. Today, this local elementary school is one of the most sought-after schools in the district.

Prior to becoming a full-time education advocate she studied Christian Education and Theatre at Florida Southern College and worked with children, youth, and their families in the United Methodist Church. Her advocacy work has taught her to never underestimate the power of the collective voice to transform education. Damaris is driven by the desire to help parents discover the power of their voice and empowering them to use them to create high quality public schools for all children.

[Liv Cook, Public School Strong TN Campaign Organizer, Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment](#)

Liv is the lead public education organizer for Statewide Organizing for Community eMpowerment (SOCM). Through the Public School Strong TN campaign, local leaders are trained to build strong, grassroots campaigns to win the honest, equitable, safe, and fully-funded schools their communities deserve. PSS teams across the state connect on common issues to shift the balance of power in Tennessee, and they were most recently successful in stopping a billionaire-backed universal voucher scam in 2024. Before joining SOCM, Liv was a public school special education teacher in rural East Tennessee, where she still lives and organizes.

[Joanna LeFebvre, Research Associate, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities](#)

Joanna is a Research Associate on the State Fiscal Policy team at the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. She provides research and technical assistance to state-level advocates to promote equity through policies like refundable tax credits and robust funding for public education. Before joining the Center, she taught in the Houston public school system. Joanna has interned at North Carolina's Office of State Budget and Management and the North Carolina Justice Center. She graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in International Development from Washington University in St. Louis and earned a Master of Public Policy degree from Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy.

Moderator:

[Hilary Wething, Economist, Economic Policy Institute](#)

Hilary Wething (she/her) is an Economist at the Economic Policy Institute. Her research examines the relationship between labor market policy, household economic security, and social safety net programs. She holds a Ph.D. in public policy and management, with concentrations in demography and economics, from the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Policy and Governance at the University of Washington.

Plenary:
1:00 – 2:00 pm

PREE Plenary Session: Facts, Fiction and Countering the Anti-DEI Backlash

This session provides guidance for navigating the surge of anti-DEI bills and court cases that threaten efforts to create a more diverse, equitable and inclusive American economy. Speakers will separate fact from fiction in the nation’s “DEI tug of war”, helping advocates and organizational leaders to identify strategies for advancing equity, diversity and inclusion given current legal and legislative challenges.

Speakers:

Fenaba Addo, PhD, Professor of Public Policy, UNC-CH and Co-Director, AEA Mentoring Program

Fenaba Rena Addo is an associate professor of public policy at the University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill. She is a nationally recognized scholar on debt and racial wealth inequality.

She has written extensively on various issues concerning racial economic inequality in the United States with a focus on higher education and family and relationships. Her work on racial disparities in student debt, older Black women and wealth, the Black Middle Class, and the Millennial wealth gap, sheds light on the ways that societal inequalities stem from policies of racial exclusion and discrimination, and how they get reproduced over time.

Charles Phipps, Sr., Director for Policy, Advocacy, and Legal Affairs, Urban League of LA

Charles Phipps is the Senior Director for Policy, Advocacy, and Legal Affairs at the Urban League of Louisiana (ULLA). As a member of the League’s Policy and Social Justice team, Charles provides strategic leadership in the development and implementation of the organization’s policy campaigns and legislative agendas. This includes shepherding the League’s SEE CHANGE Collective. He will also serve as in-house counsel on policy, legal and other matters identified by the CEO.

Amanda Posson, Senior Policy Analyst, Every Texan

Amanda serves Every Texan’s mission by working in partnership with unions, worker centers, and coalitions to raise Texas’ labor standards and achieve a fair economy. Amanda joined Every Texan in 201.

Olivia Sedwick, Counsel, Lawyer’s Committee for Civil Rights Under Law

Olivia N. Sedwick currently serves as Counsel in the General Legal division at the Lawyers’ Committee for Civil Rights Under Law. While she handles a host of racial justice issues, the bulk of her current work involves handling the Lawyers’ Committee’s response to the fallout of the recent affirmative action decision in the *SFFA v. UNC/Harvard* case through its Protecting and Advancing Diversity Equity and Inclusion Initiative. She also handles strategic policy and litigation that falls outside of the Lawyers’ Committee’s core areas yet are important to the Lawyers’ Committee’s priorities.

Moderator:

Naomi Walker, Executive Vice President, Economic Policy Institute

Naomi Walker (she/her) is executive vice president of the Economic Policy Institute. As EPI vice president, Walker builds and strengthens partnerships with allied groups to advance policy reforms that support collective bargaining; improve wages, benefits, and working conditions; and reduce racial and gender inequities. She also provides strategic guidance to EPI’s state and local research and policy work.

Sessions:
3:00 – 4:00 pm

State and Local Strategies for Empowering Immigrants

Immigrants are central to the United States' social fabric and economy, contributing to the nation's growth and development since its very beginnings. Currently, 46 million immigrants reside in the United States, and just like those who came before them, they are looking to better their own lives and the lives of their family. Restrictive and outdated federal immigration laws, however, stunt the ability of immigrants—and, by extension, the U.S. economy—to flourish. In response, some states and local governments are enacting policies to help new Americans integrate and thrive. This session will highlight effective state and local strategies for empowering immigrants and discuss approaches to shift the immigration debate away from dangerous, xenophobic rhetoric towards a narrative that acknowledges and values our interdependence with immigrants.

Speakers:

Liliana Barrera, Senior Policy Analyst, Kids Forward

Liliana manages the Reimagine Wisconsin, a partnership that is creating a community reflective, pro-worker, and anti-austerity agenda for Wisconsin. Liliana was born and raised in a vibrant community known as Humboldt Park in Chicago. As the youngest daughter of Mexican-immigrant parents, Liliana became the first person in her family to graduate from college with a bachelor's in education studies and a minor in the Russian Language. Liliana has spent most of her life advocating for the safety and well-being of Black and Brown children in different capacities. The challenges she witnessed and experienced in these spaces motivated her to obtain a master's degree in educational leadership and policy Analysis. Prior to joining the team, Liliana served as an immigration legal assistant, educator, youth counselor, and case manager. These blended roles enhanced her unassigned commitment to uplifting Black and Brown voices while challenging policies rooted in white supremacy.

Daniela Hernández, State Legislative Coordinator, Workers Defense Project

René Lara, State & Local Issues Coordinator, AFL-CIO

René Lara joined the National AFL-CIO's State and Local Legislative Team in 2022, after representing union affiliates and members as Legislative Director of the Texas AFL-CIO in Austin. Previously, René had worked for the American Federation of Teachers in the Texas and Minnesota state capitols. A native of El Paso, René graduated from the University of Texas at Austin, the LBJ School of Public Affairs and the UT School of Law. While attending school, he also worked in the Texas Senate.

Amanda Martinez, Senior Policy Analyst, Kids Forward

Amanda is based in Northeast Wisconsin and works to build meaningful relationships with community members, leaders, and organizations to better understand the priorities of the community. As a first-generation Latina and proud daughter of immigrant parents, she navigated various systems for the first time in her family. She quickly recognized how systems in this country work against allowing communities of color and immigrant communities to thrive. These experiences inspired her to enter the field of social work. Amanda holds a Bachelor of Social Work from the UW-Oshkosh. Most recently she obtained her Master of Social Work from the UW-Madison with a focus on child, youth, and family policy. Many of her academic experiences revolved around advocating for and supporting youth and students of color.

Moderator:

[Anthony Capote, PhD, Senior Data and Policy Analyst, Immigration Research Initiative](#)

Anthony Capote is senior data and policy analyst at Immigration Research Initiative. They are the director of micro-data research and analysis at IRI and also work with partners and advocates on key issues around building worker power in various industries. Anthony is also a doctoral candidate in sociology at the CUNY Graduate Center with a master's degree in sociology from the same institution. Their dissertation research focuses on how corporations use targeted micro-data to co-opt political movements and shape their brand image. They have previously worked as a crime and politics reporter in the Bronx and as adjunct professor at Hunter College. The child of Cuban immigrants, Capote has seen the positive impacts of favorable immigration policy up close. Capote speaks both Spanish and English.

[Translating Federal Infrastructure & Clean Energy Investments into Good Jobs](#)

This workshop will explore how historic federal investments from the Inflation Reduction Act and Bipartisan Infrastructure Law present opportunities to create high-road union jobs, and focus on how state and local policy, organizing, and advocacy can maximize job quality and equity impacts of those investments. Panelists will consider specific mechanisms to maximize job quality and equity impacts in industries targeted for federal investment, like incentives to ensure IRA-funded “direct pay” projects create good jobs, state legislation that requires strong labor standards on federally-funded clean energy projects, and programs to expand access to union apprenticeship trainings. After brief opening presentations from panelists, we'll move into topical breakout groups led by panelists where participants can dig into specific areas of interest for the remainder of the session with our expert panelists.

Speakers:

[Molly Bryden, Climate and Sustainability Researcher, Policy Matters Ohio](#)

Molly Bryden is climate and sustainability researcher at Policy Matters Ohio. She holds a bachelor's degree in sociology from Case Western Reserve University and a master's in public administration from the Maxine Goodman Levin School of Urban Affairs at Cleveland State University, with a specialization in nonprofit management. Working as a Graduate Assistant, her research explored the accessibility of social services, focusing on energy insecurity and public energy assistance programs. Before joining Policy Matters Ohio, Molly worked as a Fellow at Cleveland Owns, a Cleveland-based nonprofit working to build energy and economic democracy by organizing cooperative businesses and grassroots campaigns. She also serves as the Board Vice President of the United Spinal Association Northeast Ohio Chapter, a membership-based organization providing educational and recreational opportunities to individuals with spinal cord injuries. Motivated by her commitment to serving her local community and her experience in energy insecurity research and promoting community ownership of energy resources, Molly's work at Policy Matters will focus on enhancing community-level outcomes for all Ohioans as the energy transition accelerates, both regionally and nationally.

[Sarah Giltz, Director of Offshore Wind, Blue Green Alliance](#)

Sarah Giltz is the Director of Offshore Wind at the BlueGreen Alliance (BGA) where she leads national policy development and strategy related to offshore wind energy. BGA unifies labor unions and environmental organizations into a powerful force working for an economy that fights climate change, protects the health of people and the environment, stands against economic and racial inequality, and creates and maintains good-paying, union jobs in communities across the country. Sarah came to BGA from Oceana, an ocean conservation organization, where she worked on the Climate and Energy team. Previously she was a Knauss Fellow in NOAA's Climate Program Office working on climate change and human health issues, with a focus on extreme heat. Sarah holds a Ph.D. in Evolutionary Biology and Ecology from Tulane University and a bachelor's degree in biology from the College of William and Mary.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

[Maryanne Salm, Deputy Director, Department of Research, Strategic Initiatives and Economic Security, American Federation of Teachers](#)

Maryanne Salm is Deputy Director in AFT's Research, Strategic Initiatives & Economic Security Department, where she focuses on economic and fiscal policy, and vouchers. Before joining the AFT in August 2014, she was the Research Director for SEIU 121RN in Southern California. She started her career in the labor movement in 1997 at SEIU Local 1107 in Nevada, a union of public and hospital employees, serving first as Political and Legislative Director and later as the Director of Internal Organizing.

[Melissa Wells, Special Assistant to the President, North America's Building Trades Unions](#)

Melissa Wells serves as Special Assistant to the President of NABTU. Wells comes to NABTU with an extensive policy background. In her role, Wells works closely with international affiliates, state and local councils, as well as industry partners, with a particular focus on all matters related to workforce development and career pathway programs. She will also coordinate and advise on activities throughout the country to develop, integrate and articulate NABTU's prioritization of diversity and inclusion through policy advancement and recruitment and retention strategies.

Prior to joining NABTU, Wells served the Baltimore-DC Building Trades Council for 7 years as Baltimore Director, leading the growth of Apprenticeship Readiness Programs and community partnership development. She currently represents the 40th district in the Maryland House of Delegates and serves as Chief Deputy Majority Whip, 1st Vice-Chair of the Legislative Black Caucus, and the Chair of the Legislative Black Caucus Legislative Review Board.

Moderator:

[Laura Dresser, Associate Director, High Road Strategy Center](#)

Laura is Associate Director of High Road Strategy Center. A labor economist and expert on low-wage work and workforce development systems, she has both written about ways to build stronger labor market systems and worked extensively with labor, business, and community leaders in building them. Laura has written about low-wage jobs, care work, inequality and labor market reform. A co-editor of *The Gloves-Off Economy: Workplace Standards at the Bottom of America's Labor Market*, lead author of every edition of the *State of Working Wisconsin*, and frequent source on the Wisconsin economy and unions' role in labor markets, she seeks to contribute to the understanding of the economy and the improvement of life for working people.

Cohort Meeting:

4:00 – 5:00 pm

[EARN Advancing Econ Justice for Children & Families Cohort Meeting \(AEJCF Grantees only\)](#)

This is a meeting for EARN groups and grassroots partners participating in the Advancing Economic Justice for Children and Families (AEJCF) grant project. It's an opportunity for us to get together, compare notes, and strategize on ways we can better collaborate going forward.

Moderator:

[Dave Kamper, Senior State Policy Strategist](#)

Dave Kamper (he/him) is senior state policy strategist on the EARN team. He believes that worker power and racial equity are necessary components to a healthy democracy. His work focuses on organizing to build family economic security, the equitable use of federal funds, and supporting collaboration between policy thinkers and grassroots leaders that build collaborative relationships to win needed policy changes at the state and local level.

Friday, September 13

Sessions:

11:00 am – 12:00 pm

More Than a Red State Problem: Addressing the Spread of Anti-Worker Legislation

States face a host of challenges from within and from without, including right-wing organizations like the Foundation for Government Accountability (FGA), American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), that act as a pipeline for conservative legislation. States like Florida and West Virginia are often a testing ground for anti-worker and anti-immigrant legislation, which then diffuse to other states. Join us as we discuss strategies and tactics to respond to bad actors and harmful bills proliferating across the country. Participants from any state(s)—red, blue, and purple—are encouraged to join, so we can all counter typical strategies and win for workers, families, and our communities!

Speakers:

Ray Khalfani, Senior Analyst, Georgia Budget and Policy Institute

Ray Khalfani is a policy analyst at GBPI, where he supports policy research under their Economic Opportunity portfolio and helps coordinate PROSPER GA's strategic communication and partnerships. Prior to joining GBPI in March 2020, Ray worked for U.S. Congressman Hank Johnson from 2009 to 2012, then for U.S. Congressman David Scott from 2012 to 2018. As a graduate student, he worked with the Government Accountability Office, analyzing the reliability and utility of GSA's Publicly Available Federal Real Property database. Most recently, he worked as a graduate research fellow with the Southern Economic Advancement Project (SEAP), studying the intersectionality of economic mobility and rural-serving transportation programs. Ray graduated from Georgia State University and holds a Master's of Public Administration from the University of Georgia

Sean O'Leary, Senior Policy Analyst, West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy

Sean O'Leary is the senior policy analyst at the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy. Since joining the Center in 2010, Sean has authored numerous reports on working family issues, economic development, and state and federal budget and tax policy, including annual reports on the state budget and the State of Working West Virginia. Sean also leads the WVCBP's work contributing to the annual KIDS COUNT Data Book and serves on the board of directors for the West Virginia Food and Farm Coalition. Sean holds a B.A. in political science and economics and a Master of Public Administration from West Virginia University.

Alaina Reaves, Georgia State Director, SiX

Alaina Reaves serves as the inaugural Georgia State Director for SiX, bringing over a decade of political and southern organizing experience to supporting Georgia State Legislators. Alaina is a graduate of the Georgia State University Andrew Young School of Public Policy. She began her career in politics in Washington, D.C. working with the late Congressman John Lewis and at the White House with President and First Lady Obama. In addition to organizing across the state, Alaina has spent the last five legislative sessions under the Georgia Gold Dome with former House Minority Leader Carolyn Hugley.

Alexa Tapia, Unemployment Insurance Campaign Coordinator, NELP

Alexa Tapia joined NELP as the unemployment insurance campaign coordinator in 2020. Through a racial equity lens, she supports NELP's efforts to advance significant unemployment insurance reform. Her background includes a variety of legislative and organizing work, where she centered and uplifted workers and marginalized communities. She most recently joined NELP from the Kansas Department of

Back to [Table of Contents](#)

Labor (KDOL), where she served as the special assistant to the Secretary at KDOL. In this role, she spearheaded the agency's COVID-19 rapid response, providing critical and urgent resources and support to underpaid, mostly workers of color. While there, she also established a labor trafficking initiative and was a member of the Kansas Human Trafficking Advisory Board and the Governor's Grant Implementation Plan Committee. Before serving as the special assistant to the Secretary at KDOL, she served as the legislative director for the Kansas House Minority Leader. Alexa Tapia is a proud member of the NELS Staff Association, NOLSW, UAW, LOCAL 2320.

Moderator:

[Alexis Tsoukalas, Senior Policy Analyst, Florida Policy Institute](#)

Alexis joined FPI in 2019, focusing on state immigrant and worker justice issues. She holds a Master of Social Administration/Social Work from Case Western Reserve University and a Ph.D. in Public Affairs from University of Central Florida. Her career began in direct service, then shifted to policy advocacy after witnessing the inequitable harms of misguided laws and funding. She has worked in the restaurant business and with the child welfare population, young adults experiencing homelessness, those recovering from substance use disorder, and isolated older adults. A lesson that emerged was how lack of economic mobility exacerbates nearly every social issue.

[How the Contemporary Economy Shapes the Fight for the Minimum Wage](#)

Economic conditions are significantly different for low-wage workers than they were a decade ago when Fight for \$15 and other minimum wage fights rose to prominence. How do minimum wage advocates need to adapt their goals, analysis, and messaging in an economy where low-wage workers have experienced rapid wage growth, but also high inflation? What talking points and strategies have opponents of the minimum wage started to utilize in recent years? We will learn from the success of CA \$20 minimum wage for fast food workers and DC's elimination of the tipped minimum wage, as well as ongoing efforts to enact a \$15 minimum wage in Oklahoma.

Speakers:

[Gabriela Ramirez-Perez, Immigration Policy Analyst, Oklahoma Policy Institute](#)

Ramirez-Perez is the Immigration and Economic Security Policy Analyst at the Oklahoma Policy Institute. She has been with OK Policy for three years and worked on issues relating to driver's license expansion, insulin access, and the minimum wage. In her role, she researches and analyzes bills in the state legislature, what impact they will have on residents, and works to push forward better policies that will have a positive impact on the state, workers, and Oklahoma's immigrant communities.

[Chris Seymour, Strategic Initiatives Coordinator, SEIU](#)

Seymour has spent much of the last decade on research in support of SEIU's campaign to organize fast food workers. He has collaborated on projects in California documenting the crisis of wage theft, sexual harassment and abuse facing the state's predominantly Latina fast food workforce. The campaign won worker representation on a fast food standard-setting board and a raise in the industry minimum wage to \$20. His earlier research contributed to legal and NLRB cases contending that fast food corporations jointly employ fast food workers along with the franchise owners.

[Erica Williams, Executive Director, DC Fiscal Policy Institute](#)

Williams has led DCFPI Since 2021. She is a dynamic leader who excels at building relationships, consensus, and collective vision across a range of stakeholders. She brings nearly two decades of experience in pursuing racial, gender, and economic justice through public policy and is grounded in how

fiscal and economic policies can advance or impede justice. Driven by her own lived experience, Erica holds a deep commitment to antiracism, equity, and inclusion and is committed to centering Black and brown lived experiences in DCFPI's pursuit of equity and justice for communities sidelined by racism and economic inequality.

Moderator:

[Sebastian Martinez Hickey, State Economic Analyst, Economic Policy Institute](#)

Sebastian Martinez Hickey (he/him) is a State Economic Analyst on the State Policy & Research team at EPI. Martinez Hickey's research studies state minimum wages, employment levels and pay in the public sector and K-12 education, and state unemployment insurance. He is passionate about centering race and gender in his research and providing historical context for modern day inequalities.

Plenary:

1:00 – 2:00 pm

[Plenary Session: Seizing the Organizing Moment](#)

Across the country and in the South, workers are taking steps to challenge entrenched economic inequality by organizing strong new multiracial unions, despite familiar opposition from employers. From “Striketober” to “Hot labor summer,” workers are seizing opportunities to build power in an economy characterized by a strong labor market, massive federal infrastructure, clean energy, and manufacturing investments, and robust enforcement of federal labor law—yet union density remains at historic lows especially in Southern states, and millions of workers interested in forming a union face obstacles to winning one. This session will consider lessons from ongoing Southern organizing struggles, how state and federal policies are shaping workers’ ability to build power, and what it will take to build worker power on the scale necessary to upend the failed Southern economic development model and transform the U.S. economy.

Speakers:

[Dave Cash, President, United Teachers of New Orleans \(UTNO\), AFT Local 527](#)

Originally from Southern California, Dave Cash moved to and fell in love with New Orleans in 1993. He worked in various IT roles, including at the Greater New Orleans Free-Net and later as an independent web developer, database developer, and graphic designer. After the devastation following hurricanes Katrina and Rita in 2005, he began thinking about how he could help the city he loved heal and rebuild. In 2007, he became a high school social studies teacher and union member at the same time. By the end of his first year of teaching, he was a member of the union’s executive council as its recording secretary. Weathering the disaster capitalism of post-devastation education in New Orleans up close, he increased his union activism. In 2022, after two years as executive vice president, he became president of United Teachers of New Orleans (UTNO), AFT Local 527. He currently splits his time between teaching in the mornings and serving as UTNO president in the afternoons, evenings, and weekends.

[Terry Mogilles, Registered Nurse, University Medical Center](#)

Terry has been providing care and services in a variety of healthcare settings for over 45 years. In 1995 until its closure in 2020 she operated a Community Mental Health Center, caring for the city's most forgotten, severely mentally ill unhoused citizens. After closing the center, she took on a new challenge as a staff nurse in UMC's busy orthopedic clinic. It was here that her decades long social activism intersected with her nursing career in joining the fight to unionize the nurses with NNU/NNOC-Louisiana. She believes the nurses’ struggle to win a valid fair contract is rooted on their desire to ensure they have the ability to provide consistent quality care to all they serve.

[Back to Table of Contents](#)

[Michael Robertshaw, Registered Nurse, University Medical Center](#)

Michael has been a registered nurse for four and a half years, including three years in critical care. He currently works on a burn intensive care unit at University Medical Center (UMC) in New Orleans, where in 2023 he and other nurses joined the National Nurses Organizing Committee/National Nurses United (NNOC-Louisiana) with a resounding 82% victory in what was the largest private-sector union election in Louisiana in nearly 30 years. Their historic organizing breakthrough made UMC the first unionized private hospital in Louisiana. Throughout 2024, he and other UMC nurses have continued a daunting struggle to win the first union contract in New Orleans' highly concentrated and otherwise non-union health care industry. They are currently preparing for a potential strike.

[Willie Woods, Chapter President, Unite Here, Local 23 NOLA Chapter](#)

Minister Willie Woods is a Senior Organizer and President of the New Orleans chapter of UNITE HERE Local 23. As an organizer, Woods draws from his own experience working in the New Orleans hospitality industry for 35 years. While working as a banquet server at the Hilton Riverside Hotel for 17 years, Woods and his coworkers helped organize the hotel's very first union. For 4 long years, the Hilton workers fought for fair labor contract. In 2018, Hilton workers won a contract that included Seniority Rights, higher gratuity for banquet servers, affordable union health insurance, respect and dignity.

[Shakeisha Young, Senior Lead Organizer, Union of Southern Service Workers](#)

Shakeisha is a senior lead organizer for the Union of Southern Service Workers (USSW) South Carolina chapter. She is a proud alumnus of Johnson & Wales University, where she obtained a bachelor's degree in culinary arts & food service management. Her organizing experience began in 2010, including a variety of community organizations and movements, such as SC NAACP, Beta Club, SC Progressive Network, and chartering a chapter of the Black Student Union during college where she served as president for two years. She has been a field organizer with USSW for three years, starting with a focus on fast food workers, then healthcare organizing, and then worker defense. As the lead worker defense organizer, she has created a program providing know your rights training, teaching workers how to file complaints as well as a development plan to organize in their workplaces where legal action is not an option.

[Moderator:](#)

[Jennifer Sherer, Acting Deputy Director of EARN | Director of State Worker Power Initiative, Economic Policy Institute](#)

Jennifer Sherer (she/her) is director of EPI's State Worker Power Initiative. Her work focuses on expanding the ability of working people to achieve racial, gender, and economic justice through organizing, collective bargaining, and state and local policy change. She leads the Economic Analysis and Research Network (EARN) Worker Power Project, supporting a growing cohort of state and local groups working with labor and grassroots partners to advance state and local policies that expand worker rights and build worker power.