Key findings

- For over four decades, the typical worker in the South has been paid less than their counterparts in every other region of the country.
- The share of workers in the South who are paid less than $15 per hour—22% in 2021—is substantially higher than that of any other region.
- Workers across the South are the least likely to receive employer-provided health insurance or a pension compared with workers in other regions. They are also least likely to have paid sick leave.
- The South has by far the lowest rates of union coverage; the states with the lowest rates in 2023 are South Carolina (3%), North Carolina (3.3%), and Louisiana (5.1%)—compared with 11.2% nationally.

Why this matters

Lower wages and less access to health insurance, pensions, and paid leave for workers are deliberate outcomes of the Southern economic development model. Southerners from all backgrounds—across race, ethnicity, gender, immigrant statuses, and income levels—must come together to demand a new economic model that centers and empowers workers and families.

How to fix it

Policymakers in the South should raise their minimum wage and ensure that workers have access to health insurance, pensions, and paid leave. When workers are free to organize and bargain collectively, they can improve conditions in their workplace, even if politicians are intransigent.