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# Unions raise wages. Tariffs don't

## Why Trump's trade policy won't help U.S. workers

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## Summary

Tariffs do not automatically raise wages or create good jobs. While strong tariff policies can help preserve jobs in industries facing unfair competition, strong unions are a prerequisite for tariffs to translate into widespread job and wage gains. Without unions, corporate executives have no incentive to pass on the profits they're gaining to their workers. Only unionized workers can secure a fair share of tariff-driven profits, while most nonunion workers will be left behind.

At the same time, the Trump administration is pursuing unprecedented union busting that will drive unionization rates even lower than they are today. Today only 16% of autoworkers and 18% of steelworkers are in unions compared with 62% of autoworkers and 50% of steelworkers in 1983. Without strong unions, tariffs simply funnel higher profits to corporate executives and shareholders. The potential benefits of tariffs will only be shared with workers if they are combined with improved labor rights and stronger labor unions.

### How to fix it

Union leaders need to communicate this message to members and nonunion workers: Trump's tariffs will benefit businesses, not workers. Tariffs must be combined with pro-labor reforms and support for unionization so that workers can have a voice in the workplace and in policymaking.


## SECTIONS



# Introduction

In 2024, Donald Trump campaigned on the benefits of tariffs for U.S. workers. He claimed that tariffs would boost wages and create good manufacturing jobs by protecting domestic industries from unfair foreign competition. On the face of it, it might seem like tariffs would automatically protect entire industries, increasing profits for employers and wages for workers. But whether employers share the benefits of tariff protection with workers depends on their bargaining power—something very few workers have without a union.

Without unions, tariffs will mostly just lead to higher corporate profits in protected industries. And with the Trump administration waging the worst union busting in recent American history (McNicholas et al. 2025), high tariffs will mean corporate executives and Wall Street shareholders will see the big payday, not workers. Tariffs alone do not increase wages or create good jobs, unless the industries being protected by tariffs have strong unions.

Since returning to office, President Donald Trump has aggressively increased U.S. tariffs on friend and foe alike. While some of these tariffs have been paused[1] and others ruled unlawful by U.S. courts (Lynch and Zakrzewski 2025), Commerce Secretary Howard Lutnick has promised that the Trump administration's overall approach to broad tariffs is "not going away" (Bacon 2025).

## The case against tariffs

By now, there have been many critiques leveled against Trump's tariffs. They will increase inflation and consumer prices (Peller 2025). They will decrease economic growth and trigger a recession (Burga 2025; Bianco 2025). They open the door to official corruption (Hersh and Bivens 2025). The chaos of tariff increases and reversals roiled the stock market and made it impossible for businesses to plan for the future (Rosen 2025). Tariffs alienate allies needed to strengthen U.S. supply chains (Mui 2025).

These academic arguments may all be correct, but they are unlikely to sway most working-class voters. Trump's 2018 tariffs were attacked for all the same reasons, yet counties protected by those tariffs still swung toward Trump and GOP candidates in the next election (Autor et al. 2024). It is difficult to counter Trump's populist promises that tariffs will increase wages and create new manufacturing jobs with elite concerns about the stock market and aggregate economic growth (White House 2025).

What's tragic about this situation is that Trump's new tariffs will likely not deliver for most workers, not even those in tariff-protected industries. One could understand working-class voters supporting a tariff policy that prioritized long-term investment and higher pay for workers at the expense of short-term returns for shareholders. But Trump's tariffs threaten to do just the opposite—increasing profits for bosses while leaving workers far behind.

While it is true that higher tariffs may reduce new layoffs in U.S. manufacturing—a significant goal after decades of free trade caused de-industrialization and millions of job losses—maintaining the status quo is a far cry from Trump's promise that tariffs will spur re-industrialization with higher wages and new jobs (Kimball and Scott 2014; Hersh and Scott 2021). Though tariffs can offer some job security to workers in trade-affected industries, tariffs will translate into job and wage gains only when companies work collaboratively with their employees.

To be clear, this report assumes that tariffs will boost profits in protected industries, but even that may be overly optimistic. The fact that automakers have posted billion-dollar losses is a reminder that tariffs alone are not a coherent industrial policy (Ewing 2025; Tucker 2025). Domestic industries need strong demand signals for their products. Instead, the Trump administration's unpredictability has created deep uncertainty for businesses, discouraging investment and undermining long-term planning. Trump's policy incoherence will likely yield a lose-lose scenario of lower profits *and* lower wages, while threatening job growth across the manufacturing sector. In other words, even the best-case scenario for Trump's tariffs will fail to deliver higher wages or good jobs for the vast majority of U.S. workers who lack strong unions.

# Tariffs don't automatically benefit workers

To understand why, we need to revisit the conventional argument about tariffs and workers' wages in protected industries. Tariffs shield U.S. producers from unfair trade practices and cheaper imports, enabling them to increase market share—and sometimes prices. But how do those higher prices lead to more jobs and higher wages? Here's how the logic works in the theoretical (and unrealistic) models of an economic textbook.

Higher tariffs for a specific U.S. industry—for example, automobiles—increase the price of imported cars, which allows domestic car producers to raise prices without fear of losing market share. For industries facing chronic competition from unfair trade practices, tariffs help level the playing field by limiting unfairly valued competition. Absent that context, tariffs are a blunt instrument benefitting domestic producers without any accountability for worker pay. The tariff does not make it more expensive to produce cars in the United States but means that car makers can charge a higher price and earn higher profits for each car they produce. In turn, higher profits may induce increased investment and employment in making cars. Since these models assume full employment throughout the economy, no one is out looking for a job, and firms need to raise their wages to attract new workers.

But in the real world, there is little reason to expect that employers will pass on the higher profits they receive in the form of higher wages for their workers. There are two problems that get in the way of workers sharing in the benefits of high tariffs: unemployment and market power.

## Precarious employment breaks the connection between tariffs and wages

First, unemployment can break the connection between tariffs and wages. Although higher prices may lead firms to increase production, they often find a surplus of unemployed workers willing to work at the going wage. This is especially true when government policies like those in the Republican-led budget bill that Trump recently signed into law are sharply cutting social safety nets, pushing unemployed workers to accept jobs at even lower wages. This means that firms facing a slack labor market can turn higher tariffs into higher prices and profits without the need to increase workers' wages.

Part of the problem is that many U.S. counties with manufacturing-based economies still have higher unemployment rates from years of neoliberal globalization and cheap imports, even as the national unemployment rate remains relatively low (Autor, Dorn, and Hanson 2021). Given such unemployment in labor markets near manufacturing plants, we should not expect Trump's new tariffs to increase workers' wages. Unsurprisingly, this is exactly what recent studies find regarding Trump's 2018 tariffs: They increased prices and profits, but nominal wages in the tradable sector of the U.S. economy increased by only 0.1%, or about $1.20 a week (Fajgelbaum et al. 2019).

## Market power breaks the connection between tariffs and employment

Second, market power can break the connection between tariffs and employment. In competitive markets, higher prices lead firms to expand production and hire more workers. But when an industry is dominated by a small number of firms—as is the case in much of today's U.S. economy—producers often behave like monopolists. Instead of increasing output to meet higher demand, they restrict production to keep prices—and profits—high, as we saw during the COVID-19 pandemic. Tariffs that raise prices in such markets can simply boost profits without leading to more jobs. Since the 1980s, the rise of corporate consolidation has given firms greater pricing power across the economy, including in key manufacturing sectors like autos and steel (De Loecker, Eeckhout, and Unger 2020).

Consider Stellantis, which chose to spend $3.3 billion on stock buybacks in 2024 after new car prices—but not manufacturing costs—spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than making investments that would increase production and employment (Stellantis 2024; BLS 2025). And in response to more recent tariff developments in April 2025, Stellantis went ahead with a $2.26 billion dividend payout to shareholders, rather than hiring workers or investing in expanded capacity (Lawrence 2025). For these firms, expanding production in response to higher tariffs would lower prices and erode profitability. Considering the uncertainty caused by Trump's volatile tariff policy, it's no surprise that most companies are delaying investments rather than hiring new workers (CBT News 2025). The outcome mirrors what happened in 2018: Tariffs raised prices and profits but failed to increase employment in newly protected industries (Autor et al. 2024)—though they likely helped preserve jobs in industries that might otherwise have lost further ground to unfair foreign competition.

In other words, when companies are given protection from competition that lets them charge more for each unit of output they produce, they do not automatically pass the benefits of this protection onto their workers in the form of higher compensation or expanded employment. So, how can workers make sure that higher tariffs lead to higher wages and more good jobs? One way is by joining a labor union, which increases workers' bargaining power and helps them capture a share of their companies' booming profits.

Sadly, intentional policy decisions have made this option far too rare for most U.S. workers (McNicholas et al. 2019).

# Unions boost profit sharing for workers

## The UAW's 'Stand Up' strikes support profit sharing for workers

Now consider the United Auto Workers (UAW), whose 2023 "Stand Up" strike won contracts that once again include profit sharing for workers (UAW 2023). The UAW's current contracts with the Big-Three auto companies provide workers with profit-sharing bonuses of roughly $250 for every $250 million in company revenue (Martinez 2025). If Trump's tariffs increase car prices and revenue for the Big Three, unionized autoworkers are guaranteed to see higher incomes. Even before the new auto tariffs, the UAW's contract with GM led to a $14,500 profit-sharing bonus for union members in 2024. If the Big Three expand production, that would mean more jobs with union wages and benefits. The UAW's new contracts also protect workers' right to strike over future plant closures, giving the union some countervailing power against monopolistic companies placing profits over jobs (Bustamante 2023). And those gains for unionized workers also pressured some nonunion employers to raise wages too. But there is no inherent guarantee of good jobs if tariffs result in nonunion automakers increasing U.S. production at the expense of unionized facilities.

Or consider GM's recent announcement that it would invest $4 billion to create new jobs in the U.S. auto industry. Although the *Wall Street Journal* (Otts 2025) reported this as a business decision based on Trump's new tariffs, the reality is that the majority of these investments were negotiated with the UAW back in 2023 to end the "Stand Up" strike. The UAW plays a crucial role in making sure that profits for a company like GM translate into new investment and new jobs for workers. The UAW continues to push the Big Three to respond to tariff increases by reshoring production jobs to the U.S.—where these companies have unused capacity—rather than issuing stock buybacks and special dividends (UAW 2025).

This all means that auto tariffs are good news for UAW members, and it shouldn't be a surprise that the UAW has offered tentative support for targeted tariff protection for the auto industry. But only 16% of the 1.4 million autoworkers in the U.S. are unionized, so the vast majority of autoworkers should not be surprised when Hyundai, Tesla, and other nonunion auto companies and auto parts suppliers refuse to share tariff-generated profits with their workers (Unionstats.com 2025). As Shawn Fain, president of the United Auto Workers, recently explained, "tariffs increase profits—but only unions increase wages" (Fain 2025).

## The United Steelworkers win improvements in profit sharing for U.S. Steel and ArcelorMittal workers

Another example is the steel industry in which the United Steelworkers had to fight U.S. Steel and ArcelorMittal for a share of the profits generated by Trump's 2018 tariffs. Back then, tariffs increased U.S. steel prices by 30%, and companies like U.S. Steel announced $2 billion in profits (Keller 2018). But when it came time to negotiate a contract with its workers, U.S. Steel offered a small wage increase that would be wiped out by deep cuts to workers' health care benefits (Lindstrom 2018). It was only after USW members overwhelmingly voted to authorize a strike that the companies agreed to new contracts that increased wages, maintained health care benefits, and improved the companies' profit-sharing arrangement (USW 2018).

The profit-sharing provision in the current USW contract with U.S. Steel requires the company to share roughly 6% of earnings with steelworkers every quarter (Dolph-Smith 2024). That means that Trump's new 50% steel tariffs are good news for USW members, but the union only represents 18% of the 295,000 workers in the U.S. steel industry (Unionstats.com 2025). When union density is high, these gains help raise wages for nonunion workers as well. But when unions are against the ropes, as is the case for a vast majority of workers, Trump's tariffs will likely mean higher prices and corporate profits, but not higher pay.

## Workers' wages haven't kept pace with increases in their productivity

The inability of most workers to share in their company's profits is not unique to trade policy. It is just another example of workers' wages lagging behind increases in worker productivity when they lack strong unions. From 1948 through 1979, when labor unions represented between 20% and 30% of all U.S. workers, wages grew along with increased productivity (Romero and Whittaker 2023). But since 1980, precipitous declines in union density—now at 6% in the private sector—have left wages lagging far behind productivity gains (Durbin 2024). From 1979 to 2019, worker productivity grew by roughly 60%, while workers' total compensation grew by less than 16% (Mishel 2021).

Nor is the inability of many workers to share in their company's profits specific to the United States. I examined the relationship between wage growth and productivity growth in 28 manufacturing industries, across 117 countries, from 1986 to 2002. The analysis relies on labor rights data that measure the degree to which a country respects their workers' rights to act collectively (Dean 2015a). The results demonstrate that when labor rights are weakly protected, the conventional textbook model discussed above systematically exaggerates how much workers gain from tariffs that benefit their industry. Wages rise along with productivity growth when labor rights are well protected, but wages don't go up at all if labor rights are regularly violated (Dean 2016; Bivens, Hersh, and Weller 2005).

There was a time when labor unions like the UAW and USW were powerful enough to secure higher wages and profit sharing for the majority of U.S. auto and steel workers. In 1983, the UAW represented 62% of all U.S. autoworkers, and the USW represented 50% of all U.S. steel workers. With unionization now down to 16% and 18% of these industries respectively, unions have less power to translate gains to the wider economy.

# Trump combines high tariffs with union busting

The already narrow benefits of Trump's new tariffs shrink even further when we look holistically at the administration's trade and labor policies together. Since workers need strong unions to share in the benefits of high tariffs, it is crucial to understand that the Trump administration is systematically weakening American unions. Trump has quickly taken a hatchet to workers' rights, illegally firing government employees, illegally terminating the collective bargaining agreement with Transportation Security Administration workers, and illegally revoking the collective bargaining rights for roughly 1 million federal workers (McNicholas et al. 2025; Berger and Leibenluft 2025; AFGE 2025; EPI 2025). Labor historian Joseph McCartin (Glass 2025) characterized the Trump administration's activity as "by far the largest single action of union-busting in American history."

## Trump kneecaps the National Labor Relations Board

Perhaps most troubling for unions like the UAW and USW, which mostly represent workers in the private sector, are Trump's efforts to paralyze the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the federal agency that adjudicates disputes about union elections and unfair labor practices (Wiessner 2025). In January 2025, Trump illegally fired Gwynne Wilcox, a member of the National Labor Relations Board, before the end of her term (Kaye and Davis O'Brien 2025). This unprecedented action left the board without a quorum, effectively halting its operations (Cohen 2025). Now, when employers break the law by firing union organizers or intimidating workers to vote against joining a union, workers will literally be denied their day in court.

Even with a functioning NLRB, such illegal union busting was extremely common; in union elections in workplaces with more than 60 employees, employers were charged with violating federal labor law 54% of the time (McNicholas et al. 2019). Union-busting employers will only be emboldened in their illegal activity now that the NLRB lacks the quorum needed to make final decisions and levy penalties for unfair labor practices.

## Weak enforcement of labor law has a chilling effect on unions

Trump's effective termination of federal labor law enforcement is the exact opposite of what U.S. workers need. In fact, many scholars believe that the already weak enforcement of labor law before Trump's new term was a main cause of union decline. At the heart of this debate is the growing gap between increasingly high public support for unions and declining union density. Recent surveys find that 71% of Americans have a favorable view of unions, and roughly half of workers say that they would vote to join a union if they had the opportunity (AFL-CIO 2023; Poydock et al. 2025). According to law professor Kate Andrias (2016), the problem is that American labor law is failing to protect workers' right to join a union: "weak enforcement mechanisms, slight penalties, and lengthy delays—all of which are routinely exploited by employers resisting unionization—fail to protect workers' ability to organize and bargain collectively with their employers." Americans want unions, but Trump is making sure they can't have them.

Trump's anti-union reforms, especially his paralyzing of the NLRB, pose an existential threat to the country's remaining powerful unions like the UAW. The growing presence of nonunion auto plants run by multinational companies in the American South has gradually eroded the UAW's bargaining power with the Big-Three auto companies in the Midwest. These companies point to lower wages and benefits in Southern plants to justify offering lower wages and benefits (Butzel Long 2013). As Bob King, ex-president of the UAW, explained more than 10 years ago, "if we don't organize these transnationals, I don't think there's a long-term future for the UAW" (Krisher 2023). Since the early 1980s, union density in the U.S. auto industry has dropped by 74%. With Trump's anti-union reforms, high auto tariffs will only mean higher profits for increasingly nonunion auto companies.

## How U.S. economic policies compare with those in other countries

Trump's combination of high tariffs and weak labor rights is moving the U.S. toward a development strategy that will funnel the benefits of re-industrialization to capital instead of labor. If we zoom out and compare Trump's economic policies with those in other countries, there are striking similarities with Italy in the 1930s, and Brazil and South Korea in the 1960s and 1970s. These are all countries in which authoritarian governments used high tariffs to protect manufacturing industries alongside labor repression to break unions and ensure that wages lagged behind productivity (Zamagni 1993; Seidman 1994; Deyo 1989).

Of course, there are other examples that the U.S. could follow. There are countries whose governments have combined tariff protection with pro-union policies that made sure workers shared in the benefits of industrialization. In the 1930s, Norway used a combination of high tariffs and pro-labor reforms to build an industrial economy that led to shared economic growth (Grytten 2002). In the middle of the 20th century, Argentina and India both used high tariffs and pro-union policies to spur rapid industrial growth as well as stronger unions, higher wages, and lower income inequality (James 1988; Kohli 2012). Argentina's and India's overall development strategies faltered in the late 20th century, but for decades, they produced gains that were broadly shared with workers.

Proposals to expand investment in sustainable new energy industries similarly envision an industrial policy that combines tariffs and subsidies for green industries like wind turbines and electrical vehicles with pro-labor reforms that will make it easier for workers in these industries to join a union and secure a share of the benefits (Tucker et al. 2024). Something similar is playing out now in the European Union, where the trade protection and strong unions of the Green Deal Industrial Plan jointly support good jobs in green industries (European Commission 2023).

## History shows that worker support for tariffs isn't set in stone

When discussing how tariffs will make America great again, Trump often praises President McKinley's high tariffs in the 1890s (Cabral 2025). Ironically, there is no better example to illustrate that workers will only share in the benefits of high tariffs if they have a strong union. Even better, it shows that the spell can be broken— that workers will understand that high tariffs and weak unions promise nothing more than wealth extraction.

The crucial historical precedent is the infamous Homestead steel strike, which culminated in the election of Grover Cleveland, a Democrat, in 1892 (Dean 2015b). The Republican Party of the late 19th century promised that high tariffs would deliver higher wages for U.S. workers. When a Republican Congress passed the protectionist McKinley tariff of 1890, steel prices and profits started to soar.

Just months before the 1892 general election, the Amalgamated Association of Iron and Steel Workers (the precursor of today's United Steelworkers) was locked in contract negotiations with the Carnegie Steel Company (the precursor of today's U.S. Steel). The union argued that "with the metal tariff as it is... there is no reason why the labor of the mills should not have part of the plum of profits that the ownership has been enjoying" (National Labor Tribune 1890). In response, the company locked out the workers and proclaimed that "hereafter, the Homestead steel works will be operated as a non-union mill" (Brody 1960).

The ensuing conflict ultimately ended with four striking workers killed, the town of Homestead occupied by the Pennsylvania National Guard, and the union decimated (Burgoyne 1893).

Although the steelworkers lost the strike, the conflict became a major focal point in the 1892 presidential election. Workers throughout the country began to question whether the GOP's high tariffs actually delivered benefits to U.S. workers.

While the steelworkers had loyally voted for Republicans for decades, their new views on tariffs led many of them to throw their support to the Democratic Party (Arizona Republican

1892). The industrial states of Illinois, Indiana, New York, and Wisconsin all voted for Grover Cleveland, the victorious Democratic candidate for president.

# What does all this mean for today's politics?

Trump's 2018 tariffs, which increased average U.S. tariffs from 2% to 4%, helped him win voters in 2020 (Tradingeconomics.com 2025; Autor at al. 2024). Will Trump's more aggressive 2025 tariffs, which are set to increase average tariffs to 16% or more, do the same (The Budget Lab 2025)? Given the recent memory of high inflation, many Democrats hope that linking Trump's new tariffs to rising consumer prices will help win back working-class voters (DNC 2025).

There is some evidence that this time might be different, with overall public support for tariffs decreasing dramatically since Trump began increasing tariffs at the start of his second term. In early June, a survey found that 64% of independent voters opposed Trump's tariff plans (Keene 2025).

And yet, Trump's tariffs still resonate with many Americans. According to a recent Gallup poll, half of Americans expect tariffs to create more manufacturing jobs, and 69% are willing to accept at least some economic disruption to realize such gains (Brenan 2025). Or consider a recent focus group with Pennsylvania voters who voted for Biden in 2020 but Trump in 2024 (Talev 2025). Most of these swing voters expressed continued support for Trump and his tariffs because "things have been so screwed up for so long and he's finally doing something about it."

When the next elections arrive, will voters in swing states like Pennsylvania and Michigan reward Trump for following through on one of his main campaign promises, or will they reward Democrats for attacking tariffs in ways that sound a lot like defending free trade (Stiglitz 2024)?

## How to construct a progressive message on tariffs

Thankfully, there is an alternative. Progressives can explain that Trump's economic policies are meant to benefit businesses and not workers. As long as working-class voters believe that they benefit from tariffs, they will only be further alienated by politicians who critique tariffs for roiling the stock market and creating business uncertainty. Progressives will defeat Trumpism by embracing a progressive version of economic populism that combines tariffs and pro-labor reform to deliver shared prosperity (Reston 2025).

Union leaders need to communicate this message to rank-and-file members, as well as nonunion workers. Trump's tariffs will only benefit the small minority of workers that have the bargaining power to win improvements in the workplace. And with Trump's anti-labor policies simultaneously crushing unions, those benefits will be enjoyed by fewer and fewer workers. In the short term, workers who want to share in the potential benefits of high tariffs need to join a union. In the long term, workers who want to share in the prosperity of re-industrialization need to fight for policies that strengthen workers' unions as well as their industries.

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# Notes

1. Proclamation No. 14266, 90 Fed. Reg. 15625 (April 9, 2025).

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