



President Biden’s Approach to Labor Issues in the United States

by Lauren Harrell

During his campaign, President Biden set forth his economic plan that he would implement if elected president. **This plan** focused on three aspects in which it states he will “*Check the abuse of corporate power over labor and hold corporate executives personally accountable for violations; encourage and incentivize unionization and collective bargaining; and ensure that workers are treated with dignity and receive the pay, benefits, and workplace protections they deserve*”. As the campaign progressed, The COVID-19 pandemic negatively affected the U.S. economy, and Biden’s immediate focus centered on **stabilizing the economy**. Because President Biden has only been in office for a little over two months, a strong analysis cannot be drawn on whether or not he has succeeded in carrying out the objectives of his economic plan; however, the following information will discuss some of the noteworthy steps that he has taken regarding labor issues in the United States, during his time in office thus far.

On January 20th, 2021, President Biden was sworn in as the 46th president of the United States and was now charged with following through on his commitment to “*strengthening worker organizing, collective bargaining, and unions*”. The day after his inauguration, Biden signed the **Executive Order** on Protecting Worker Health and Safety. This order sought to protect the health the safety of essential workers who are easily exposed to COVID-19 through their work environment, by reducing the risk of contracting the virus. In this executive order, it is highlighted that “*Healthcare workers and other essential workers, many of whom are people of color and immigrants, have put their lives on the line during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic*”. In a **study** done by the Sorenson Impact Center, it was found that “*Non-Hispanic Blacks were more likely than non-Hispanic Whites to hold occupations considered essential (e.g., in transportation, health care, food preparation, and cleaning services). Non-Hispanic Blacks disproportionately occupied the top nine occupations that placed them at high risk for contracting COVID-19 and for potentially infecting their households*”.

Occupation category	Weighted % occupation within racial/ethnic group ^a					% Difference ^b
	White	Black	Hispanic	Asian	Other	
Transportation and material moving	5.33	10.58	8.65	4.74	7.32	5.25
Health-care support	1.76	5.46	2.41	1.95	2.10	3.70
Food preparation and serving	4.53	6.63	7.92	5.70	8.31	2.10
Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance	2.62	4.36	8.16	1.47	3.66	1.74
Personal care and service	3.28	4.84	4.15	6.14	4.75	1.56
Office and administrative support	11.22	12.76	10.75	8.36	12.69	1.54
Protective service	1.92	3.25	1.49	0.58	1.97	1.33
Production	4.98	6.27	7.25	5.42	5.54	1.29
Community and social service	1.65	2.80	1.39	1.01	2.29	1.15
Farming, fishing, and forestry	0.51	0.27	2.35	0.19	0.91	-0.24
Life, physical, and social science	1.03	0.61	0.41	2.27	0.58	-0.42
Health-care practitioner and technical	6.43	5.75	2.98	9.17	5.42	-0.68
Legal	1.46	0.74	0.48	1.02	0.95	-0.72
Installation, maintenance, and repair	3.04	2.32	3.45	1.68	1.23	-0.72
Computer and mathematical science	3.22	2.26	1.15	11.59	2.79	-0.96
Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media	2.51	1.51	1.38	1.89	2.78	-1.00
Architecture and engineering	2.46	1.32	0.97	4.56	1.33	-1.14
Sales and related	10.58	8.84	9.57	7.93	12.02	-1.74
Business and financial operations	5.84	4.06	2.81	7.20	3.70	-1.78
Construction and extraction	4.48	2.61	11.50	1.34	4.72	-1.87
Education, training, and library	7.38	5.27	3.78	4.76	6.09	-2.11
Management operations	13.76	7.43	6.97	11.02	8.86	-6.33
Total	100	100	100	100	100	-

On February 19, 2021, President Biden issued a [statement](#) of support for “Congressman David Cicilline and the entire Congressional Equality Caucus for introducing the Equality Act in the House of Representatives”. On February 25, 2021, [the bill](#) was passed which “prohibits discrimination based on sex, sexual orientation, and gender identity in areas including public accommodations and facilities, education, federal funding, employment, housing, credit, and the jury system”. President Biden’s displayed commitment to acknowledging the existence of discriminatory biases in the workplace is a necessary step in the right direction for the United States in order to increase equality and just practices not only in the workplace, but all throughout the country.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only increased the demand for Amazon workers, being as though many people are seeking out other ways to shop without leaving their homes. The *Amazon Prime* delivery service markets itself as being able to deliver items to its’ customers within two days of placing the order. This demanding commitment that Amazon makes, ends up falling on the shoulders of the warehouse workers to reach an incredible level of productivity. Amazon warehouse workers in [Bessemer, Alabama](#) are casting their votes to decide whether or not they will form the first Amazon warehouse union in the United States. In accordance with the objectives highlighted in President Biden’s economic campaign plan, he has since come out in support of the warehouse workers in Bessemer through a video posted online; however, he has done so without explicitly naming Amazon. On February 28, 2021, [Biden stated](#) “*Today and over the next few days and weeks, workers in Alabama and all across America are voting on whether to organize a union in their workplace... This is vitally important — a vitally important choice, as America grapples with the deadly pandemic, the economic crisis and the reckoning on race — what it reveals is the deep disparities that still exist in our country*”. The Bessemer Amazon warehouse vote concludes on March 29, 2021, and regardless of the outcome, this decision will surely cause waves in the country and call Amazon’s ethical practices into question, as has already begun.

On March 18, 2021, [the House](#) “passed legislation that would create a pathway for undocumented farmworkers to earn a green card, sending the bill to the Senate”. On the same day, President Biden issued a statement on the Farm Workforce Modernization Act of 2021 in which he discussed the U.S. farmworkers’ importance to the country and highlighted how most of them are undocumented. In this statement, Biden expressed [his support](#) for the act and its delivery of “*the lawful status and better working conditions that this critical workforce deserves, as well as much needed stability for farmers, growers, and the entire agriculture industry*”. Farm labor is often performed by undocumented migrant workers, and while this form of labor is necessary for the country, those performing the labor have historically not been given the proper means of moving along a pathway that will give them the opportunity to become U.S. citizens. With migrant workers being the ones who are doing so much for the agricultural sustenance of the country, they should be given a just opportunity towards citizenship.

On March 22, 2021, President Biden’s pick for the position of Secretary of Labor, Marty Walsh, was confirmed by the senate. In [Walsh’s statement](#) following the confirmation he said “*As the son of immigrants and a former union laborer, I share their deep commitment to building an economy that works for all. I have been a fighter for the rights of working people throughout my career, and I remain committed to ensuring that everyone – especially those in our most marginalized communities – receives and benefits from full access to economic opportunity and fair treatment in the workplace. I believe we must meet this historic moment and, as the nation’s Secretary of Labor, I pledge to help our economy build back better*”. As a former union leader, Walsh’s timely confirmation provides hope that the inequalities and disparities that occur within the country’s workforce will be closely regarded and violators will be held responsible, especially following the injustices that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light.

In a [White House brief](#) from March 31, 2021, the American Jobs Plan was introduced in which wealthy citizens are taxed in order to improve the quality of U.S. infrastructure, as well as create new jobs. This plan proposes a modernization of nearly all aspects of the current economic conditions that are outdated and in need of change. The U.S. is in need of the creation of sustainable

jobs, especially with the pandemic exposing some of the country's foundational cracks regarding unsustainable jobs in the fast-growing, consistently changing world of today. This plan works toward improving the physical conditions of U.S. infrastructure, while also providing some reassurance for citizens that jobs of the future will be available and accessible.

While President Biden has only served a little over two months of his term, he has made some positive steps towards implementing the economic objectives that he ran his campaign on. With the added layer of the COVID-19 pandemic adding a high level of volatility and exposing the various disparities that exist within the U.S. labor force, Biden has centered his objectives on combatting the pandemic, in order to then work towards more just and equal workforce policies and practices. With the majority of his term left, Biden will be expected to deliver on his economic plan presented to the people of the United States while on the campaign trail, in which he committed to “*strengthening worker organizing, collective bargaining, and unions*”.

Lauren Harrell
Spelman College