2025

STATE OF WORKING PENNSYLVANIA

KEYSTONE RESEARCH CENTER

Stephen Herzenberg
Claire Kovach
Maisum Murtaza
Avery Spicka

The Keystone Research Center (KRC) was founded in 1996 as an independent, non-partisan research and policy organization to broaden public discussion on strategies to achieve a more prosperous and equitable Pennsylvania economy. Since its creation, KRC has become a leading source of independent analysis of Pennsylvania's economy and public policy. KRC is located at 412 North Third Street, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania 17101-1346. Most of KRC's original research is available on the KRC website at www.keystoneresearch.org. KRC welcomes questions or other inquiries about its work at 717-255-7181.

About the Authors

Stephen Herzenberg is a Keystone Research Center economist and executive director emeritus. He holds a Ph.D. in economics from MIT and writes widely on how Pennsylvania and the United States can achieve broadly shared prosperity. His writings for national audiences include "Chapter 8. Decent Work and Economic Growth," in Governing for Sustainability, Environmental Law Institute, 2023; "Hatching Labor's Phoenix," in The Many Futures of Work, Temple University Press, 2021; Losing Ground in Early Childhood Education, Economic Policy Institute (EPI), 2005; New Rules for a New Economy: Employment and Opportunity in Postindustrial America, Cornell/ILR Press, 1998; and U.S.-and Mexico Trade: Pulling Together or Pulling Apart?, Office of Technology Assessment, U.S. Congress, 1992.

Claire Kovach is a senior research analyst at the Keystone Research Center. She holds a Ph.D. in Sociology from The Pennsylvania State University. She specializes in quantitative data analysis, with recent focus on the minimum wage, apprenticeship programs, and labor market trends in Pennsylvania. She writes widely on issues of poverty, workforce development, and policy. Her work for a national audience includes studies on poverty and material hardship trends, apprenticeship in Appalachia, and translating complex data into actionable insights for policymakers and the public.

Muhammad Maisum Murtaza is a KRC research analyst. He first joined KRC in 2020 after interning for the organization in summer of 2019. He has an undergraduate degree in economics from The Pennsylvania State University where he also helped teach an ecology course. Maisum has coauthored "The State of Working Pennsylvania" for the last several years and conducts research on climate issues, immigration, education and new developments in the labor force. He is pursuing a graduate degree at the University of Maryland's School of Public Policy.

Avery Spicka is a research analyst at the Keystone Research Center. He started with the KRC as a summer intern in 2024 and joined the team full-time in June 2025. He holds an undergraduate degree from Smith College in government, with a minor in economics. While at Smith, Avery did research on state-level LGBTQ policy diffusion and the influence of model legislation. His work with the KRC focuses on organized labor and he is passionate about how unions provide a path towards a more equitable Pennsylvania economy.

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This year's *State of Working Pennsylvania* marks Stephen Herzenberg's final report as Executive Director of the Keystone Research Center. He retires as executive director this year and will step into a research economist and senior advisor role at KRC.

Steve has led KRC since December 1995. Under his leadership, the organization has grown to become a trusted resource for understanding the state economy. His work has guided policymakers, researchers, and advocates for more than 30 years.

As a Ph.D. economist from MIT and an internationally recognized scholar, Steve has written extensively on workforce development, unions, economic development, and industry. His research and publications have made an impact here in the Commonwealth, as well as among national and international audiences, influencing our understanding of economic challenges and opportunities.

Steve has been a patient and thoughtful mentor to colleagues, as well as a collaborative and dependable partner to allies. His tireless work ethic and deep belief in building a stronger and fairer Pennsylvania have left an enduring mark not only on this annual *State of Working Pennsylvania* report, but on the organization and on the many people who have been lucky to call him a colleague through the years.

Since the very first edition of the *State of Working Pennsylvania* in 1996, Steve has shaped this report with insightful analysis, bold ideas, and a vision for a stronger and more equitable Pennsylvania. His leadership has made the report a benchmark for understanding the state's economy and charting a course for its future.

In his new role, Steve will continue to advance KRC's mission with his scholarship and expertise. While this is his last *State of Working Pennsylvania* as Executive Director, we look forward to the contributions he will continue to make as part of our team. We thank him deeply for his leadership, dedication, and decades of service to Pennsylvania.

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Executive Summary

As Labor Day 2025 approaches, making sense of the latest news on the Pennsylvania and U.S. economies feels a bit like reading a mystery novel. We have some clues about where our story is headed. We have a sense of unease about what might happen to our main character, "working people." But we'll need a few more chapters – or months of data – before we know how the plot truly unfolds.

Just a year ago, the job market was as favorable to workers as at any point since 1979 – even though most working families weren't feeling the good times in the wake of pandemic price hikes and decades of wage stagnation and rising inequality. As of "The State of Working Pennsylvania 2024," we enjoyed steady job and wage growth and unemployment rates near a 50-year low. Inflation had cooled to below 3%.

The latest data indicate that our economy is less favorable to workers than a year ago.

- **U.S. GDP shrank in the first quarter of 2025 and PA output growth flatlined**. GDP growth in the last six months remained half the rate of a year earlier.
- **U.S. jobs grew 0.3% in the first seven months of 2025, only half as much as a year ago**. Counter to national trends, Pennsylvania job growth improved in the first six months of 2025 – to 0.7% from 0.4% compared to a year earlier – and exceeded the U.S. job growth rate.
- **Layoffs of federal employees this year contributed to slower job growth**. Pennsylvania had an estimated 2,600 fewer federal jobs in July than in January, a drop of 2.5%.
- **Unemployment rates over the past year ticked up in the United States and more so in Pennsylvania**. Unemployment rates rose sharply for workers of color.
- **Hiring rates and quit rates both fell in the last year**, indicators of a labor market in which individual workers have less leverage.
- After rising briefly in the middle of 2024, **average inflation-adjusted hourly earnings in Pennsylvania** have declined since fall 2024.

Both economists and consumers feel nervous about the future.

- Federal Reserve economists' projections for 2025 and 2026 all deteriorated since September 2024, with inflation in 2025 now projected at 3% instead of 2.1%.
- Consumer confidence dipped sharply in the first part of 2025 and, despite a rebound in June and July, remains well below the level at the end of 2024.

When you ask “whodunnit?” – who damaged the economy for working people – most experienced economic sleuths point the finger to federal policies. The prime suspect: erratic tariff policies that may be sparking renewed inflation and eroding investment. Cuts in clean energy and manufacturing subsidies may also have begun to hamper private investment.

The full impact of massive federal policy shifts lie in the future. As well as tariffs and clean energy, these include cuts in food assistance (about to go into effect), in Medicaid (delayed until after the 2026 election), in university and research funding (impacts now and well into the future), and attacks on the union rights of private workers alongside layoffs and de-unionization of federal workers. If we simply watch these shifts, our middle class is likely to end up in the morgue by the end of our story.

Our unfolding economic mystery, however, is an interactive, “choose your own adventure,” novel. If one set of public policies rig the economy further against working families, another can put us back on track to shared prosperity.

We recommend three steps. **First**, Pennsylvania’s legislature (still!) needs to raise the minimum wage to $15 per hour as lawmakers have in New York, New Jersey, Maryland and Delaware. A typical full-time, low-wage worker received an estimated $16,000 less in wages, cumulatively, from 2013 to 2024, largely because of our legislature’s failure to also enact a $15 per hour minimum wage. In the aggregate, all low-wage workers in Pennsylvania received over 10 billion less in wages from 2014 to 2024.

Second, a bipartisan group of lawmakers in the U.S. Congress – including Republican representatives whose districts stand to lose billions in investment and thousands of jobs – should extend the deadlines for clean energy and manufacturing tax credits back to their original Inflation Reduction Act dates.

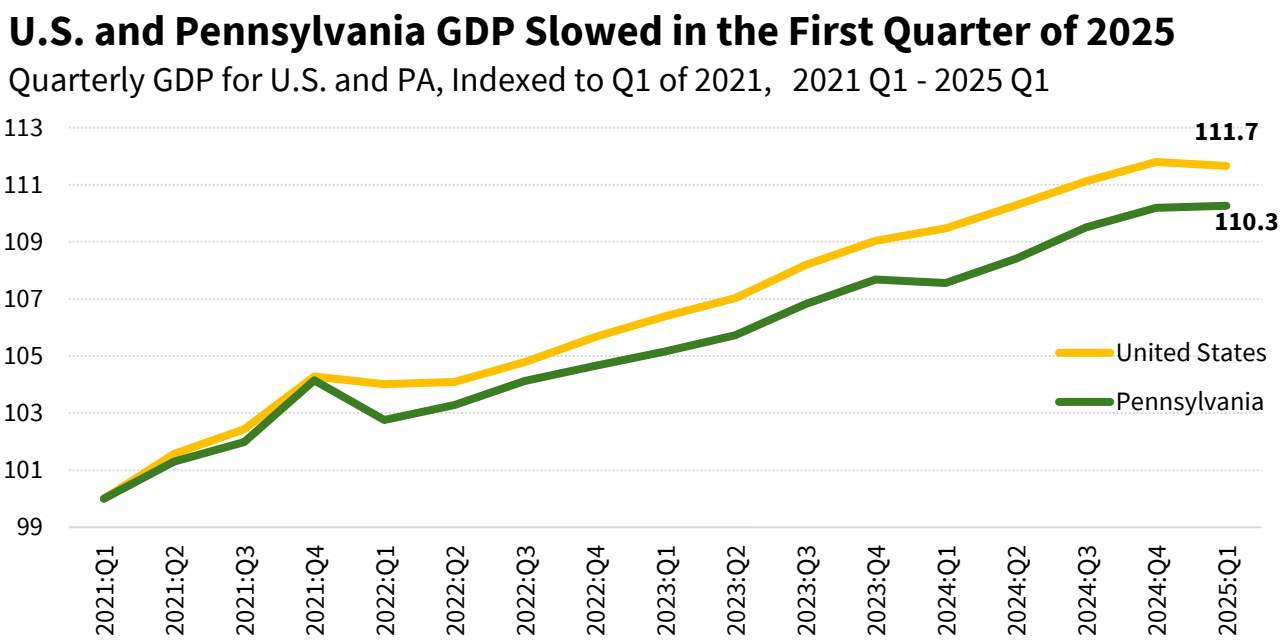
Third, local, state, and federal elected officials supportive of workers’ union rights should counter the Trump Administration’s assault on labor. When lawmakers can’t enact legislative changes, they can support union organizing using the “bully pulpit.” They can spread the story, for example, about the unionization of 800 nurses at Magee Women’s Hospital this past Saturday (August 23, 2025), and how this may herald broader organizing at UPMC, in acute health care, and across other local service industries that have to stay near their customers. State and federal lawmakers should also craft legislation that could help birth an upsurge in union organizing and a second New Deal – to be ready in 2027 or 2029 if legislative opportunities present themselves.

In the end, Pennsylvanians and Americans author our own economic story. If we want it to end well for working people we need to win the arguments about what policies serve the public good, and we need to elect lawmakers who are committed to shared prosperity and not just an economy that favors corporations and the 1%.

Gross Domestic Product (GDP)

Key economic indicators we report show how the economy has performed over the past year and across a longer timeline. Figure 1 shows that Pennsylvania GDP stalled between 2024 Q4 and 2025 Q1 and national GDP declined. Advance estimates of national GDP show an uptick for Q2 but GDP growth in the first half of this year remained half the rate of a year earlier.[1]

Figure 1



Note: GDP levels are indexed to Q1 of 2021 = 100 based on real GDP in 2017 chained dollars.
Source: Keystone Research Center based on Bureau of Economic Analysis data tables for state-level GDP, https://apps.bea.gov/itable/iTable.cfm?ReqID=70&step=1&acrdn=1.

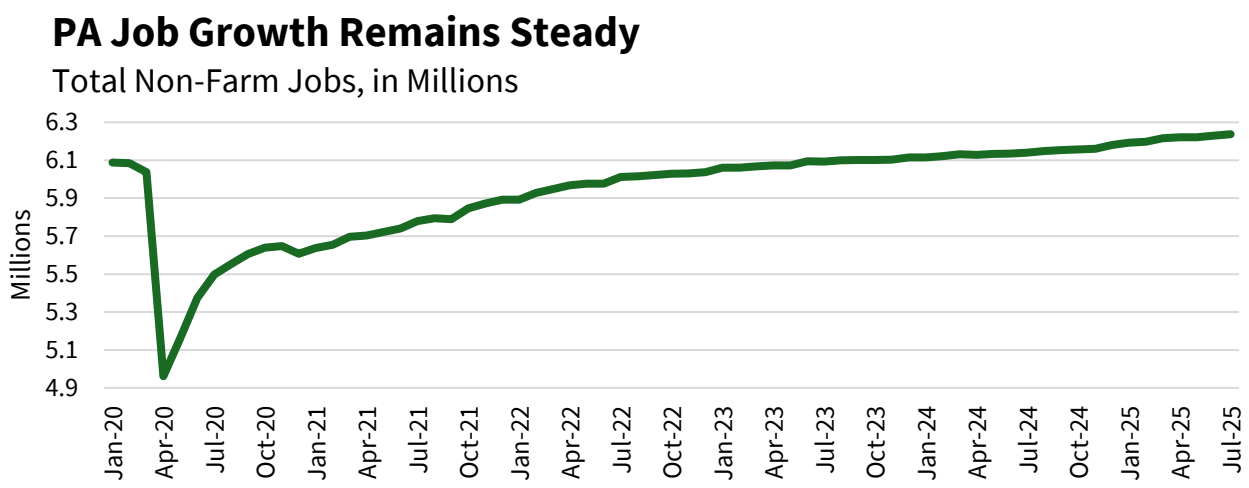
Jobs

Non-Farm Jobs, Employment, and the Labor Force

Pennsylvania enjoyed relatively robust employment growth in the past year, reaching 6,237,200 non-farm jobs in July 2025, 98,000 more than in July 2024 number (Figure 2).

[1] Imports are a subtraction in the calculation of GDP; thus, a decrease in imports results in a positive contribution to GDP. Bureau of Economic Analysis, Gross Domestic Product 2nd Quarter 2025 Advance Estimate, July 30th 2025. https://www.bea.gov/news/2025/gross-domestic-product-2nd-quarter-2025-advance-estimate

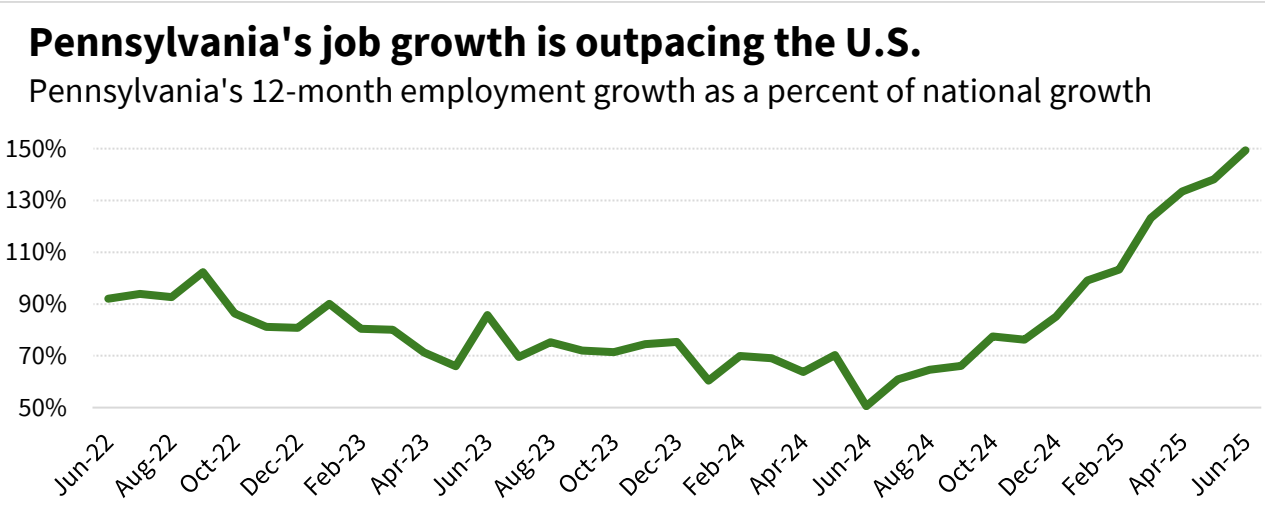
Figure 2



Source: Keystone Research Center Analysis of Current Employment Statistics from the Pennsylvania Center for Workforce Information and Analysis

Pennsylvania's recent job growth rate has outpaced national growth since February 2025, an atypical situation for a state with slow working-age population growth and with job growth long term that has run below half the national rate (Figure 3). Decomposing job growth by industry reveals that leisure and hospitality job growth has been particularly rapid compared to U.S. levels. It would require more research to determine if this reflects expansion of Pennsylvania's tourism sector, including in bucolic rural areas, or other factors. A second factor could be that immigrants represent about 10% of the Pennsylvania workforce compared to 20% nationally. As federal immigration policy threatens foreign-born labor supply and constrains job growth, it has less impact on Pennsylvania job growth than U.S.

Figure 3



Note: Each month shows PA job growth over the past 12 months as a percent of U.S. job growth in the same period. For example, June 2022 shows PA job growth from June 2021 to June 2022 as a percent of U.S. job growth in the same period. Source: Keystone Research Center analysis based on Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Establishment Survey

Two sectors not responsible for Pennsylvania's relatively robust recent job growth are construction and manufacturing. In fact, construction employment remained 1.3% below pre-pandemic (February 2020) levels in July 2025, compared to a 9.2% jump in construction jobs nationally. Pennsylvania had 1.6% fewer manufacturing jobs than pre-pandemic in July 2025, while U.S. manufacturing jobs stood close to the pre-pandemic level (0.1% below it to be precise).

Federal government employment trends have been in the news because of the Trump Administrations DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency) -led cuts in federal jobs. The drop in federal government employment in Pennsylvania was similar to that nationally, 2.5% versus the 2.8% national decline from January 2025 to July 2025.[2] There were 101,700 federal workers in Pennsylvania in July 2025, 2,600 fewer than in January 2025.

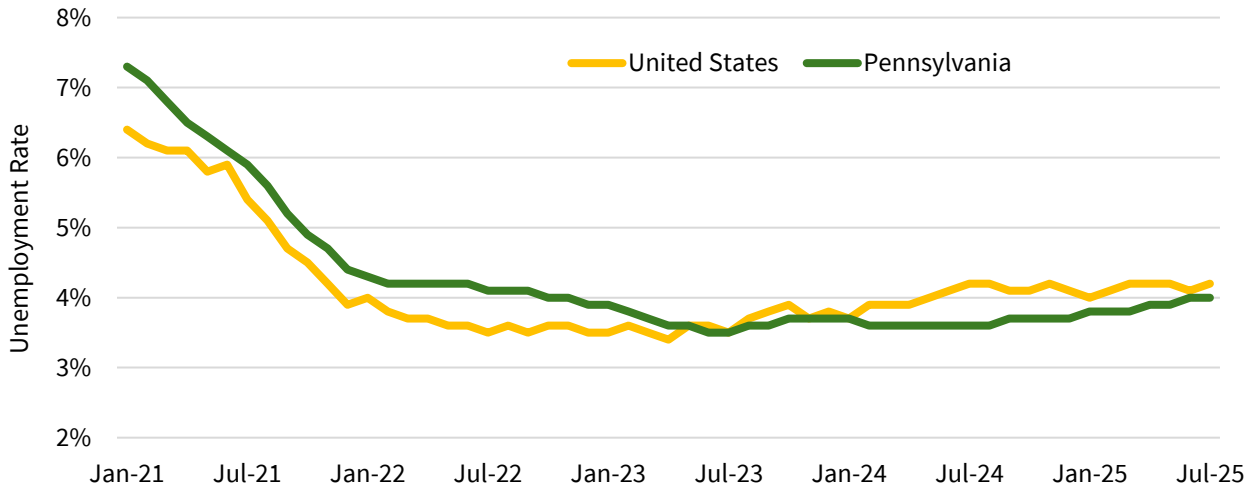
Unemployment

Figure 4 shows that unemployment equaled 3.6% or 3.7% for 17 months leading up to December 2024 – lower than any pre-pandemic month in the nearly 50 years that this data series has been reported (since 1975). Unemployment rose 0.3% since the end of 2024, to 4.0% in July 2025, compared to the national rate of 4.2%.

Figure 4

Pennsylvania Unemployment Has Been Historically Low, and Lower than the National Rate this Year

Pennsylvania and US unemployment, January 2021 to July 2025



Source: Keystone Research Center based on Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS). Tables 1 and 3, http://www.bls.gov/news.release/laus.t03.htm and http://www.bls.gov/news.release/laus.t01.htm.

[2] Bureau of Labor Statistics, Series ID: SMS42000009091000001

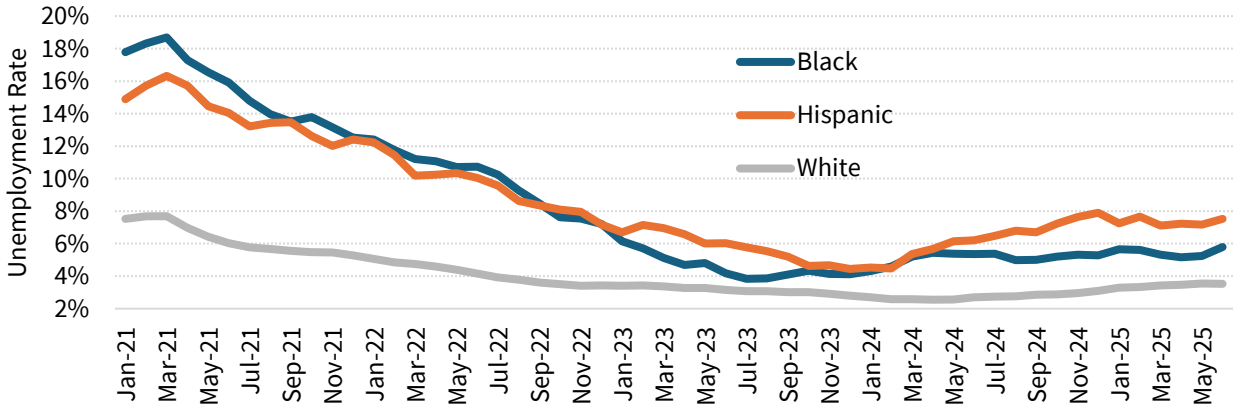
Unemployment by Race

The tight labor market and low unemployment in Pennsylvania from 2022 to 2024 resulted in significant progress reducing Black and Hispanic unemployment rates (Figure 5). That progress started to reverse for Black workers starting in mid-2023 and for Hispanic workers starting in January 2024. The 12-month rolling average of unemployment increased the most in the last year (the average for July 2024 to July 2025 compared to the average for July 2023 to July 2024) for Hispanics (from 6.2% to 7.5%). The Black 12-month rolling average rose from 5.4% to 5.8%.

Figure 5

Unemployment Rates for White, Black, and Hispanic Workers Since January 2021

12-Month Rolling Monthly Unemployment Rates in Pennsylvania, January 2021 - June 2025



Note: Four quarter rolling average.
Source: Keystone Research Center based on Economic Policy Institute analysis of Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS) and Current Population Survey (CPS) data.

Job Openings and Labor Turnover

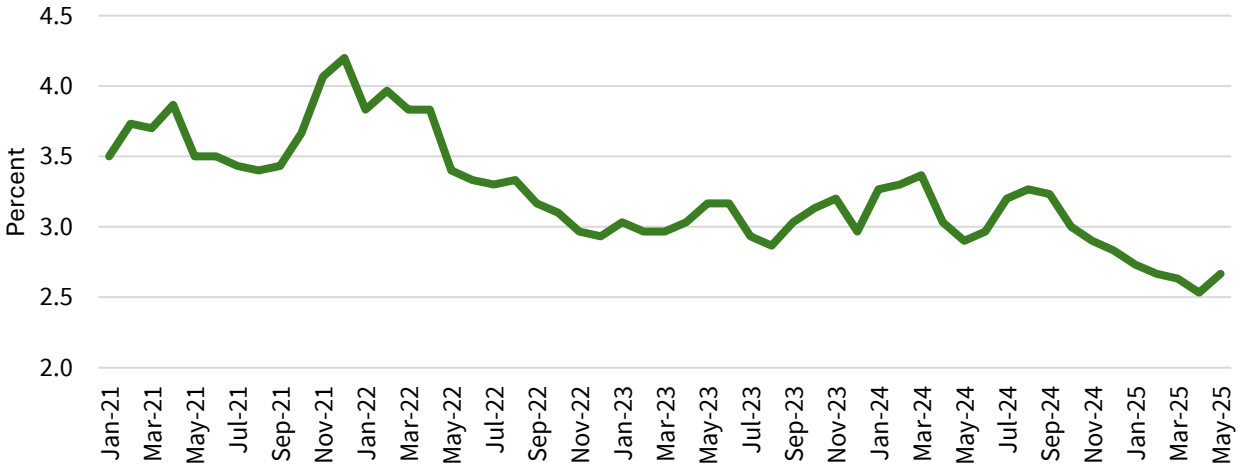
Additional indicators of Pennsylvania workers declining labor market leverage come from the Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) data. This data series tracks hiring, quits, layoffs and discharges, plus allows comparisons of the number of unemployed workers to job openings (when this ratio is lower, and there are fewer unemployed workers than job openings, workers have more leverage).

From 2021 to 2024, the average Pennsylvania hiring rate equaled 3.4% (i.e., hiring as a percent of employment equaled 3.4%). That rate fell to 2.6% in the first few months of 2025 (Figure 6).

Figure 6

Hiring Rate in Pennsylvania

Rate of Hires 3-Month Rolling Average in Pennsylvania, January 2021 to May 2025



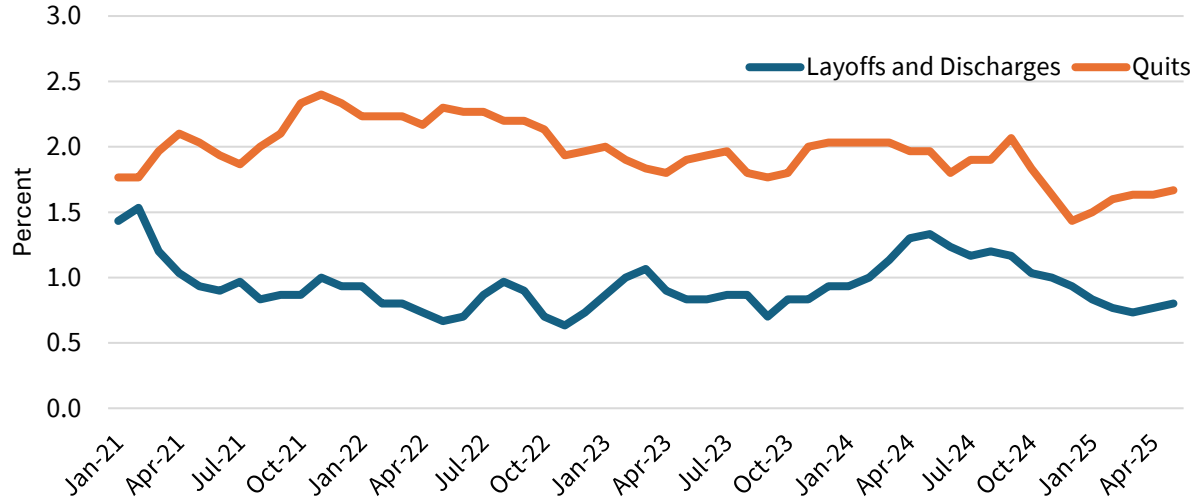
Source: Keystone Research Center based on Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey data accessed from Bureau of Labor Statistics data releases, https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/dsrv?jt.

Pennsylvania's quit rate also fell over the past year, although it rebounded a little since the end of 2024 (Figure 7). A lower quit rate indicates a higher share of workers staying in their current jobs, perhaps because they lack confidence they can secure an equivalent or better new job.

Figure 7

Rates of Pennsylvania Quits, Layoffs and Discharges

Three-Month Rolling Average, January 2021- May 2025



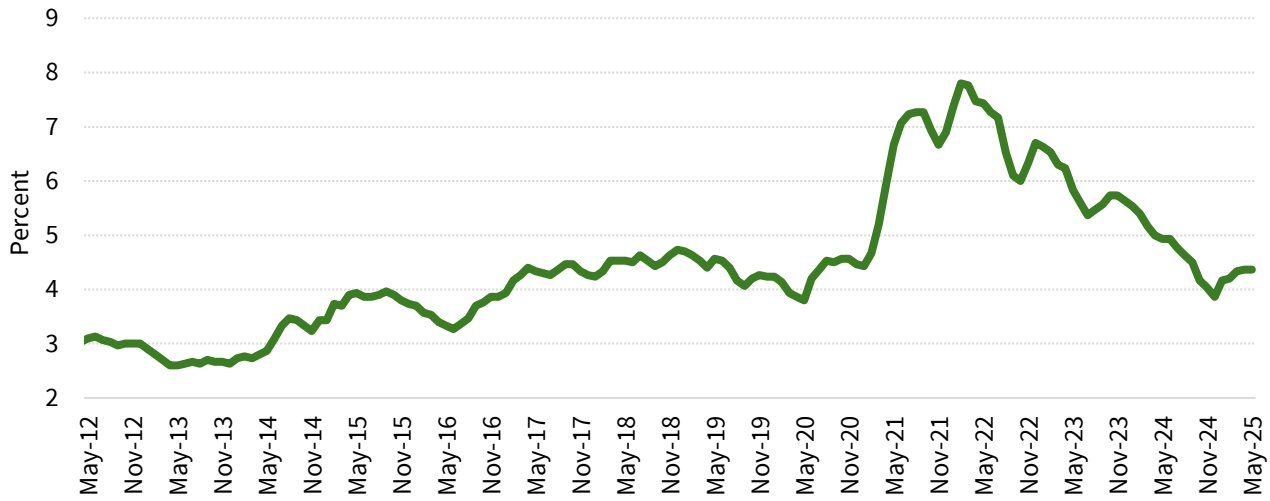
Source: Keystone Research Center based on Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey data accessed from Bureau of Labor Statistics data releases, https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/dsrv?jt.

The job openings rate (job openings as a percent of total jobs plus job openings) reached its historic high point (since BLS started reporting JOLTS in 2002) 7.9% in January 2022. This was the height of the perceived post-pandemic "Great Resignation," during which many lower-wage workers in frontline service jobs remained out of the labor force even as COVID infection rates fell. Since then, the job openings rate has steadily trended down to about half its peak level, 4%. Since the end of 2024, the job openings rate has crept back up above 4%.

Figure 8

The Job Openings Rate is Lower than It Has Been In Recent Years

Pennsylvania Job Openings Rate Three-Month Rolling Average, May 2012 to May 2025



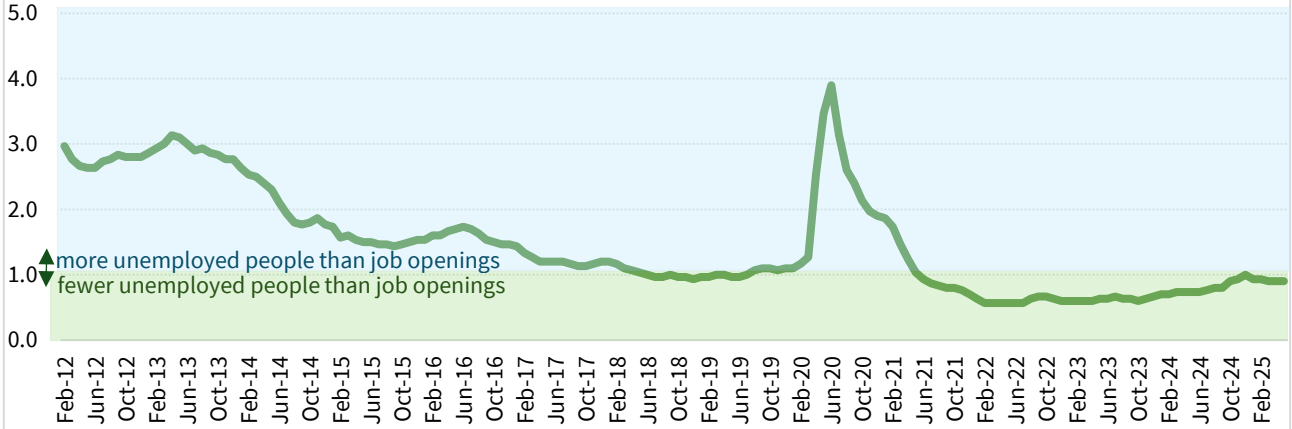
Note: The job openings rate is computed by dividing the number of job openings by the sum of employment and job openings—that is, all filled and unfilled jobs—and multiplying that quotient by 100.
Source: Keystone Research Center based on Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey data accessed from Bureau of Labor Statistics data releases, https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/dsrv?jt.

The unemployed-workers-to-job-openings ratio consistently fell in the 0.6 and 0.7 range in 2022-2024 (Figure 9). With 10 job openings for every six or seven unemployed people, workers found themselves able to bargain for higher pay, whether at a current employer or by changing jobs. In the last eight months, the number of unemployed workers and job openings in Pennsylvania have been nearly the same, a one-to-one ratio.

Figure 9

Unemployed Workers and Job Openings at Nearly One-to-One Ratio Over the Last 8 Months

Pennsylvania Total Nonfarm Unemployed-Workers-to-Job-Openings Ratio, Three-Month Rolling Average, February 2012 to May 2025

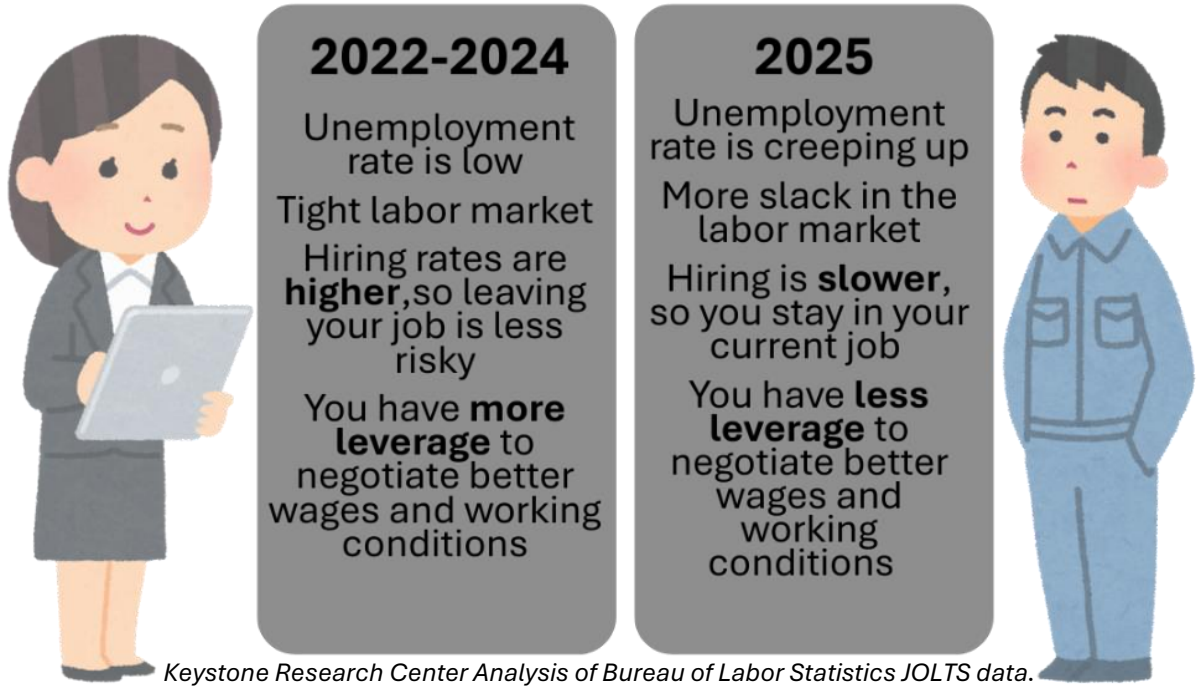


Source: Keystone Research Center based on Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey data accessed from Bureau of Labor Statistics data releases, https://data.bls.gov/cgi-bin/dsrv?jt.

Figure 10Figure 10 summarizes the contrast between 2022-24 and 2005 based on JOLTS data. It highlights the slightly less favorable labor market situation for workers this year than the previous three years.

Figure 10

Summary comparison of recent and current labor market dynamics



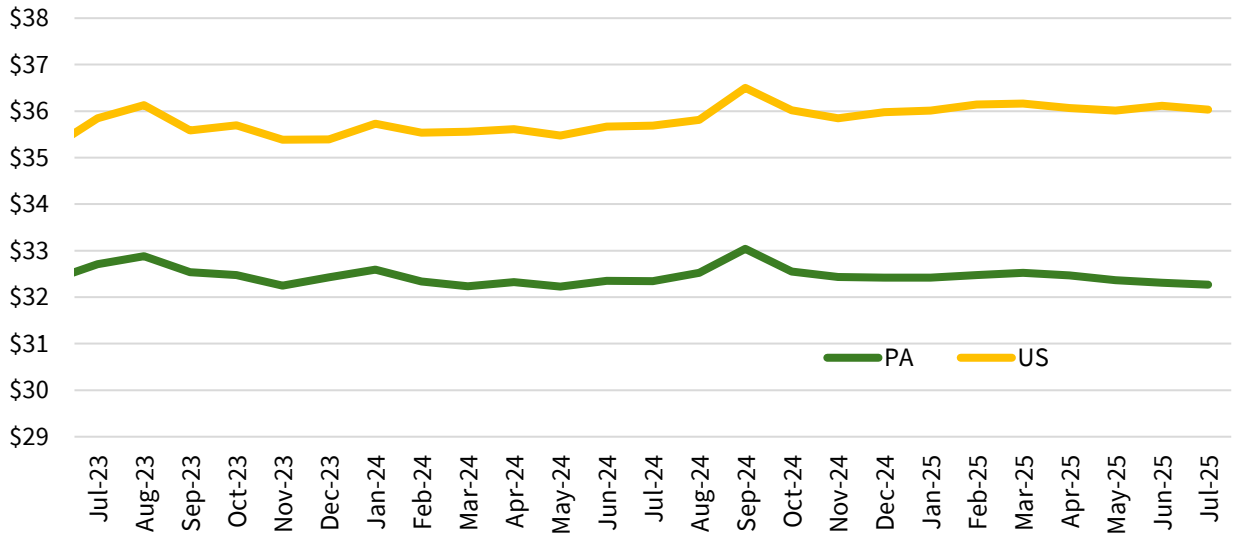
Keystone Research Center Analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics JOLTS data.

Wages

Figure 11 shows the average hourly earnings for all private employees in the United States and Pennsylvania over the past two years. While Keystone Research Center usually does not use averages, preferring "median" wages as a better indicator of how typical workers are faring in the labor market, average hourly earnings have the advantage of monthly availability. That allows us to examine what's happening to wages as late as July 2025.

Average inflation-adjusted Pennsylvania hourly earnings climbed from spring to fall 2024 but fell in the last quarter of 2024. In 2025, wages declined in Pennsylvania and have been flat in the United States.

Figure 11



Source: Keystone Research Center Analysis of U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data retrieved from FRED, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis Data Series CEU0500000003 and SMU42000000500000003. Inflation adjusted using R-CPI-U-RS, All items from the BLS.

Table 1 breaks down Pennsylvania's wages and how they've changed for different percentile groups over the 2013 to 2024 period. (We start our series in 2013 for consistency with our minimum wage analysis compared to neighboring states, which follows later in this section.) In 2024 (i.e., from 2023 to 2024), wages changed little for the 20th to 50th percentiles, changed a lot (for a single year) at the 10th percentile (3.8%) and a fair amount (2.1% to 3.0%) at the 60th to 90th percentiles. 2013 and 2019, wages grew by 11.1% for the lowest earners, while they grew 15.6% for the highest earners at the same time. In two earlier periods, pre-pandemic from 2013 to 2019 and 2019 to 2023 (long enough for the pandemic wage jolt associated with low-wage workers exiting then returning to the job market to wash out of the numbers) wages

grew across the board. They grew more at the top in the earlier period and more in the bottom half in the second period (again indicative of emerging labor market leverage for middle and low-wage workers).

Table 1

PA Wages by Percentile, 2013–2024
(In Real 2024 Dollars)

	Percentile								
Year	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90
2013	$10.80	$13.27	$15.93	$18.84	$21.71	$25.43	$30.47	$37.62	$50.23
2019	$12.00	$14.63	$17.29	$20.24	$23.71	$27.89	$33.69	$42.58	$58.08
2023	$13.36	$16.51	$19.05	$21.61	$25.29	$29.69	$35.57	$44.13	$59.45
2024	$13.87	$16.50	$19.01	$21.84	$25.30	$30.31	$36.45	$45.31	$61.20
% Change 2013-19	11.1%	10.3%	8.6%	7.4%	9.2%	9.7%	10.6%	13.2%	15.6%
% Change 2019-23	11.4%	12.9%	10.1%	6.8%	6.7%	6.5%	5.6%	3.6%	2.4%
% Change 2023-24	3.8%	0.0%	-0.2%	1.1%	0.1%	2.1%	2.5%	2.7%	3.0%
% Change 2013-24	28.4%	24.4%	19.4%	15.9%	16.5%	19.2%	19.6%	20.4%	21.8%
$ Change 2013-24	$3.07	$3.24	$3.08	$3.00	$3.59	$4.88	$5.98	$7.69	$10.97

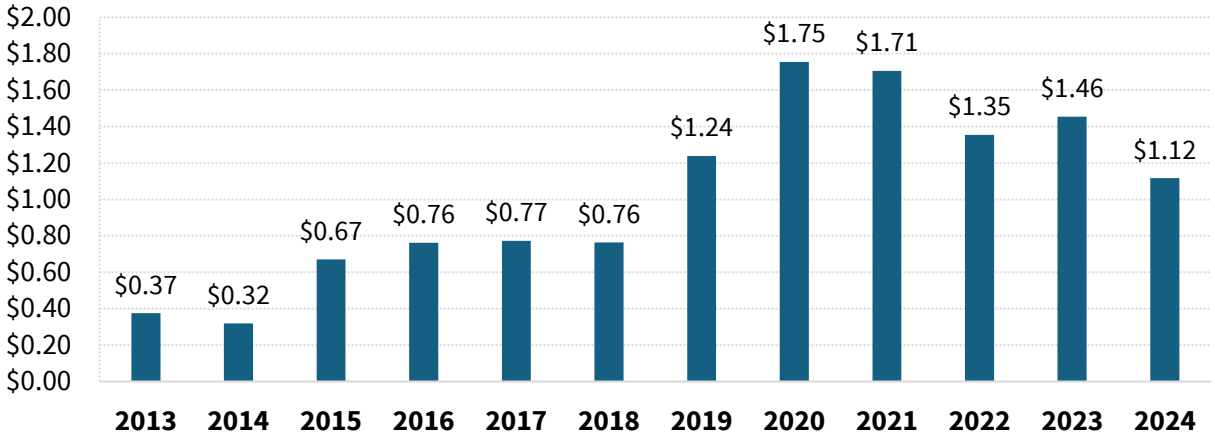
Source: Keystone Research Center based on Current Population Survey data accessed through Economic Policy Institute Data Library.

Figure 12 contains a comparison of trends at the low end of the job market (for the 10th percentile worker) in Pennsylvania versus four neighboring states (NY, NJ, MD, and DE) that have now increased their minimum wage to at least $15 per hour. Despite yearly efforts to raise it, Pennsylvania's minimum wage has been stuck at $7.25 per hour for over 16 years. Among our four neighbors, New York increased its minimum wage first, starting in 2014. The figure shows the gap between our neighbors' (weighted-average) 10th percentile wage and Pennsylvania's 10th percentile growing steady from 2013 to a peak of $1.75 per hour in 2020. This gap has now come down to $1.12, likely because our neighbors' minimum wages have not increased as quickly since about 2021. In addition, competition for workers, including competition from high-wage neighboring states in border counties, has driven Pennsylvania's 10th percentile wage.

Figure 12

The Wage Gap Between Low Earners in Pennsylvania's and the Neighboring Region is More Than Triple What it Was Ten Years Ago

Dollar Difference for Four-State Region & PA's 10th Percentile Wages, 2013-2024



Note: Neighboring region includes New York, Delaware New Jersey, and Maryland. Weighted regional wages are based on seasonally adjusted total nonfarm jobs numbers from the Current Establishment Survey, Table 5, http://www.bls.gov/news.release/laus.t05.htm, provided by the Economic Policy Insitute.
Source: Keystone Research Center analysis of Current Population Survey microdata accessed from the EPI State of Working X Data Library

We estimate that a typical full-time, Pennsylvania low-wage worker has received about $16,307 less in wages, cumulatively, since 2014 because of our legislature's failure to emulate our neighbors. Across all low-wage workers, we conservatively estimate low-wage workers in Pennsylvania lost more than $10 billion in income from 2014 to 2025.[3] If Pennsylvania increased its minimum wage to $15 per hour in 2026, wages would rise for nearly a million workers across the state, including some who earn more than $15 per hour.[4]

As Pennsylvania has remained stuck at $7.25 per hour, the buying power of our minimum wage has plummeted. At this point, even a $15 per hour wage is far from a living wage in every single county in Pennsylvania. Researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology

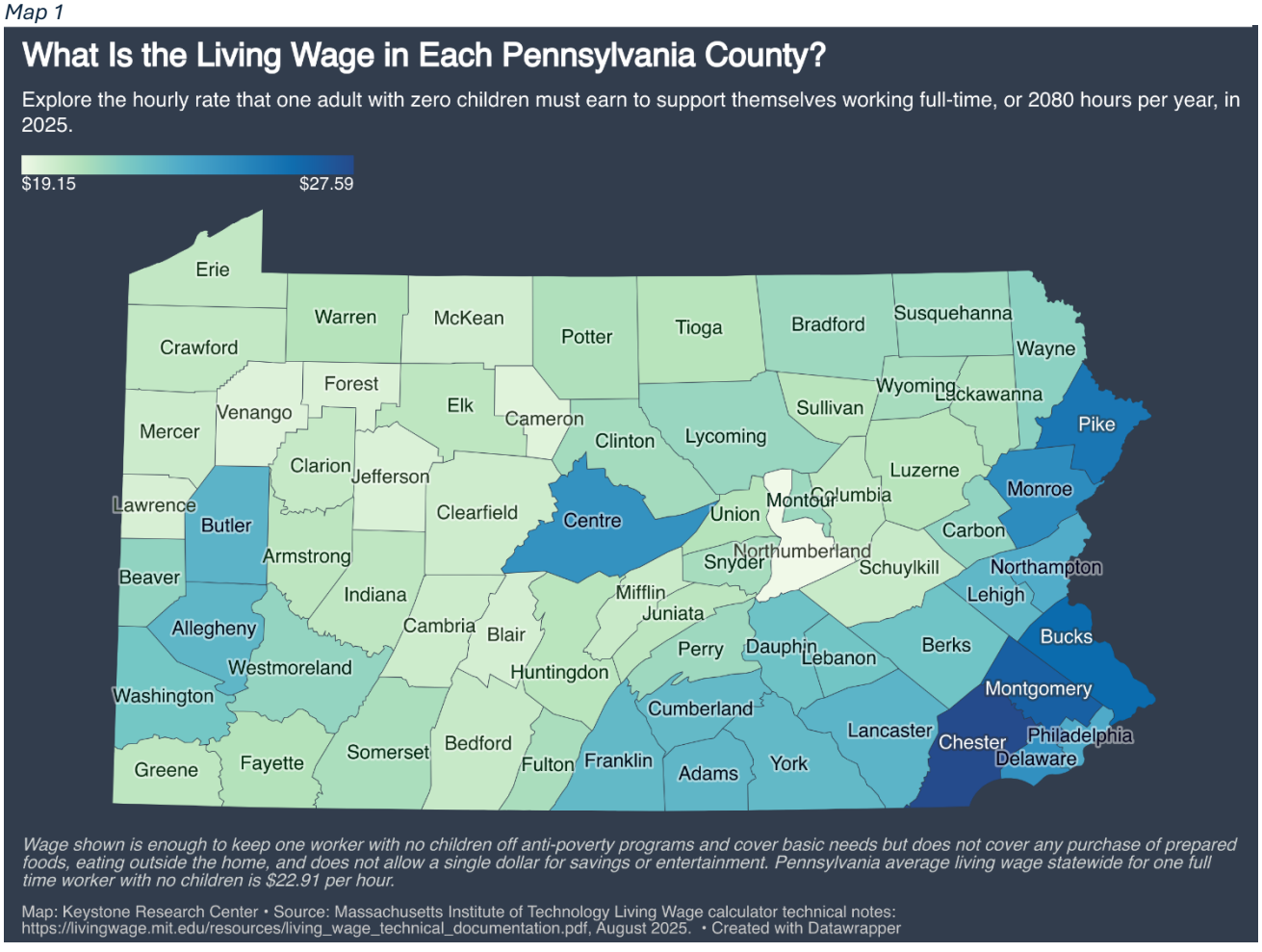
[3] We derive these figures as follows. In each year from 2014 to 2024, we attribute to minimum wage policy differences the increase since 2013 in the wage gap at the 10th percentile between Pennsylvania and the four neighboring states that have increased the minimum wage to $15 per hour (NY, NJ, DE, MD). The cumulative increase in the wage gap across all those years is $7.84. If a low-wage worker worked full-time, full year from 2014 to 2024, this means they received $7.84 times 2080, or $16,307, less in total earnings over those years. To get the aggregate loss in income, we assume that 15% of Pennsylvania workers receive lower wages by the same amount as at the 10th percentile. We also take into account that about 37% of workers work part time and assume they work 20 hours per week. With these assumptions, the $16,307 loss in wage income for one full-time worker scales up to $11.8 billion less for all low-wage workers. We consider this estimate conservative because minimum wage increases likely have some impact above the 15th percentile.

[4] Claire Kovach, "Who Benefits? The Demographic Impact of a Higher Minimum Wage in Pennsylvania", Keystone Research Center, July 2025: https://keystoneresearch.org/research_publication/who-benefits-the-demographic-impact-of-a-higher-minimum-wage-in-pennsylvania/

(MIT) produce a living wage calculator that shows the wage needed to get by in each area. They determine a basic budget for different family sizes and numbers of workers and then calculate the “living wage” high enough to cover the basic budget without public assistance. This basic, or “bare bones,” budget includes zero dollars budgeted for entertainment, food eaten outside of the home, or even savings.

Map 1 illustrates the living wage for one Pennsylvania adult (no children) by county and shows how far the minimum wage has fallen behind meeting basic needs. With the state legislature at an impasse, a federal increase may be imperative in order to lift wages for Pennsylvania workers, as there is not a single county in Pennsylvania has a living wage lower than $19 per hour.

Map 1



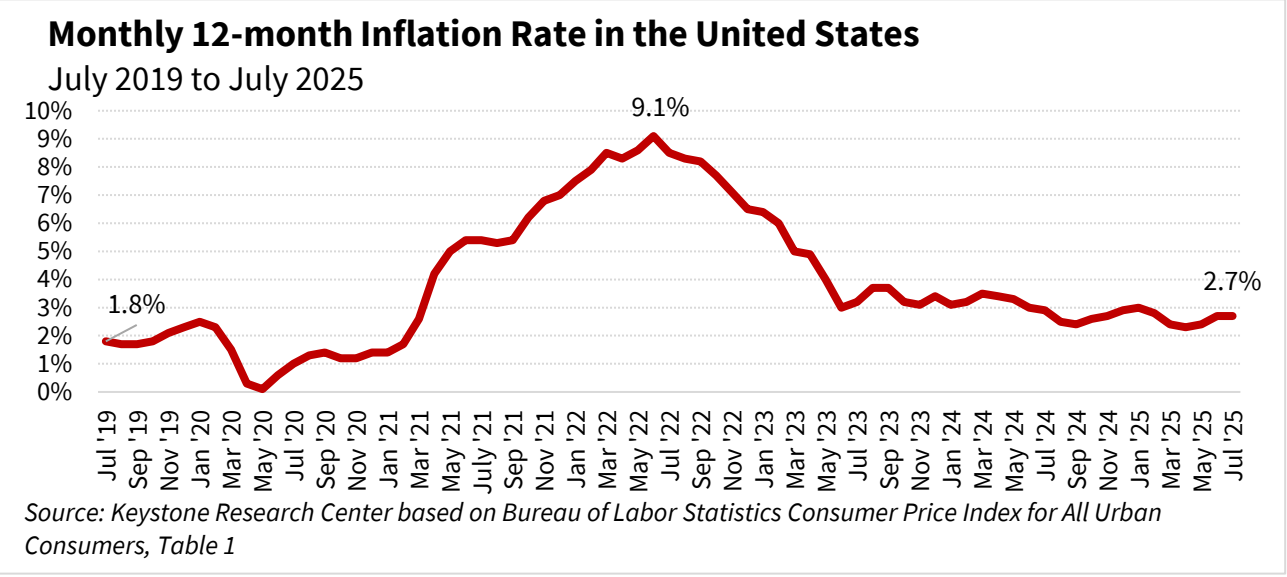
Visit: https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/k6TxT/1/ for a dynamic version of the map

Inflation

Consumer Price Index

The 12-month inflation rate for July 2025 was 2.7%, up from a recent low of 2.3% in April 2025 but significantly below the pandemic peak of 9.1% and down slightly from 2.9% in July 2024 (Figure 13). The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) August 2025 release highlighted that the index for shelter drove the recent inflation increase, underscoring the continuing nationwide challenge of housing affordability.[5]

Figure 13



Source: Keystone Research Center based on Bureau of Labor Statistics Consumer Price Index for All Urban Consumers, Table 1

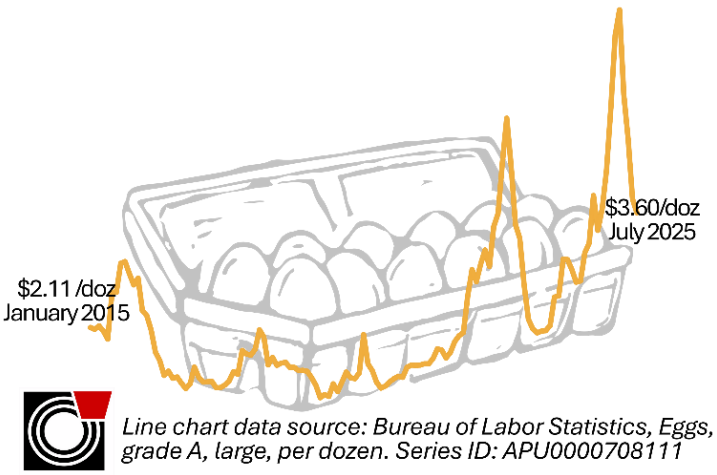
One leading indicator of future changes in the Consumer Price Index (CPI) is the Producer Price Index (PPI). This tracks prices at the wholesale level, measuring how much domestic producers receive for their goods and services. In July 2025, the PPI jumped 0.9%, the largest one-month increase in three years.[6] This is likely to foreshadow additional increases in consumer prices over the next period of months.

Over the past several years, inflation anxiety for working families has been driven in part by the cost of necessities, or "staples." In the pandemic, the price of a dozen eggs received a lot of attention. While $0.52 higher in July 2025 than in July 2024, the price of a dozen eggs has come down a lot from its peak of $6.23 per dozen (Figure 14). The price of eggs is sensitive to shocks like avian flu, but feed and energy costs can also drive egg prices.

[5] Bureau of Labor Statistics, July 2025 Consumer Price Index Summary, Released August 12 2025: https://www.bls.gov/news.release/cpi.nr0.htm

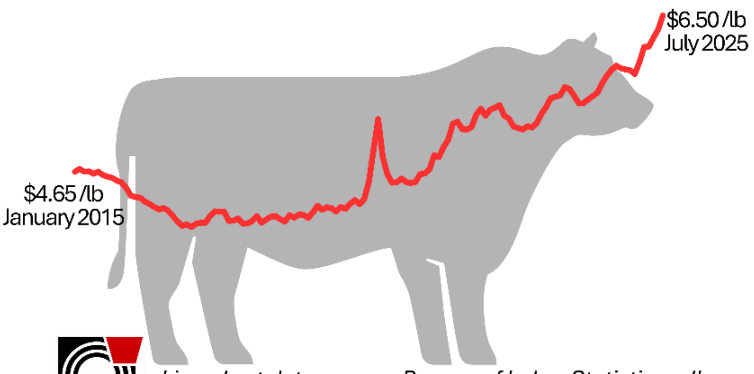
[6] "Producer Price Indexes, July 2025". Bureau of Labor Statistics, August 14, 2025. https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/ppi.pdf

Figure 14



Line chart data source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Eggs, grade A, large, per dozen. Series ID: APU0000708111

Figure 15



Line chart data source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, all uncooked ground beef, per lb. Series ID: APU0000FC1101

In the last year, the price of beef reached a record high in the United States. Unlike eggs, that experience big price spikes and drops, the price of beef has experienced a steadier climb (Figure 15). Beef prices are partly caused by the weather which impacts output.[7] Droughts have been more frequent and more intense due to climate change, limiting land use and driving up the price of feed for livestock. In response, many ranchers decreased their herd sizes. Today, tariff policies also drive beef prices. In particular, tariffs on Brazilian beef and restrictions on Mexican imports have limited the supply of beef.

Economists Projects and Consumer Confidence

Over the past year, both economists' projections about future economic performance and consumers' confidence have grown more pessimistic.

Participants in the Federal Reserve Banks Federal Open Market Committee (FOMC) meeting each quarter submit their projections of the most likely outcomes for real gross domestic product (GDP) growth, the unemployment rate, and inflation for the current year, two years forward, and over the longer run.[8] The quarterly meetings held in September and December 2024, and in March and June 2025 each included projections for the full year 2025 and 2026. For inflation, GDP, and unemployment, projections for 2025 and 2026 all deteriorated. The overall inflation projection (for the Personal Consumption Expenditures (PCE) survey) for 2025, for example, rose from 2.1% in September 2024 to 3% in June 2025. In September 2024, participants projected GDP growth at 2% for both 2025 and 2026 but 1.4% and 1.6% in June 2025. Unemployment projections over this period climbed one or two tenths.

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[7] "Beef Prices in the US are climbing to record highs – here's why", July 2025, Associated Press: https://apnews.com/us-news/beef-prices-rising-us

[8] See, for example, Federal Reserve Bank, "Summary of Economic Projections," June 18, 2025; https://www.federalreserve.gov/monetarypolicy/files/fomcprojtabl20250618.pdf.

Consumer sentiment as estimated based on a University of Michigan survey dipped sharply in the first part of 2025 and, despite a rebound in June and July, remains well below the level at the end of 2024.[9] The preliminary July estimate equaled 61.8, down from a peak since July 2024 of 74 in December 2024. Consumers rating of the "Economic Outlook – 12 Months" peaked since July 2024 at 97 in November 2024 and fell to 68 in July 2025, up from 48 in April. The Conference Board's survey of consumer confidence shows similar trends.[10]

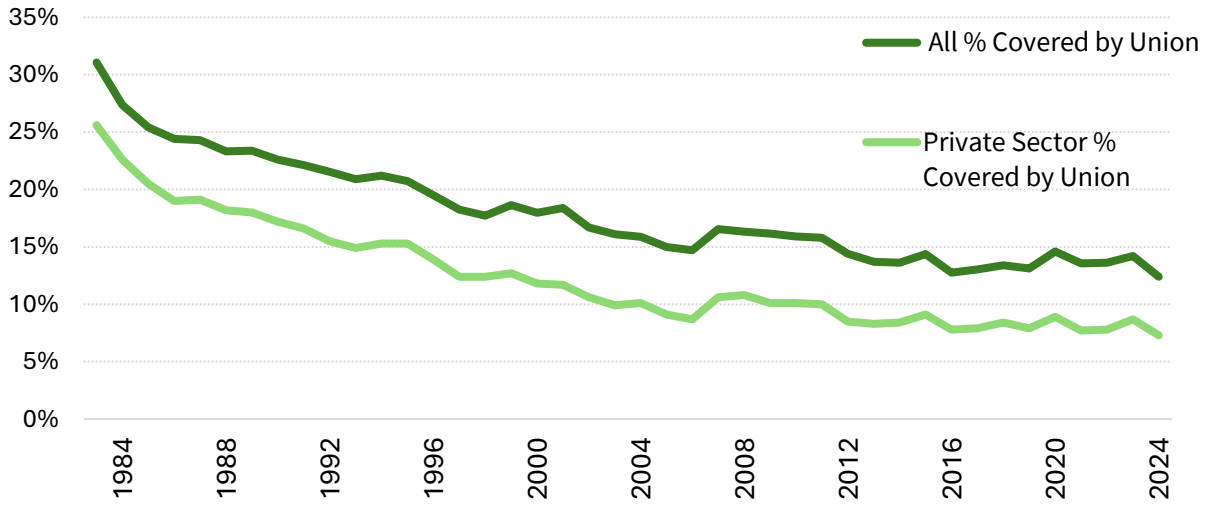
Unions

Pennsylvania labor unions have engaged in several high-profile organizing efforts in the last several years, including at Starbucks, the University of Pittsburgh, a Whole Foods store in Philadelphia, and very recently, UPMC. Reflecting this activity, private sector union coverage (union representation as a share of employment) in Pennsylvania edged up slightly from 2016 to 2023 (from 7.4% to 8.7%). Coverage then slipped back in 2024 (to 7.3%).

Figure 16

Pennsylvania Union Coverage Has Declined Since the 1970s but Has Changed Little in Recent Years

Percent of workers (private sector and all) covered by a union, 1983-2024



Source: Keystone Research Center analysis of Current Population Survey data, unionstats.com, copyright 2024 by Barry T. Hirsch, David A. Macpherson, and William E. Even.

[9] Joanne Hsu, "Preliminary results from the July 2025 survey," University of Michigan Surveys of Consumers, July 18, 2025; https://data.sca.isr.umich.edu/fetchdoc.php?docid=79216.

[10] This interpretation is based on eyeballing and online chart showing the "Consider Confidence Index" from January 2007 to August 2025. To access the data behind the chart appears to require paying for it. See the Conference Board, "Consumer Confidence Little Changed in August," Tuesday, August 26, 2025; https://www.conference-board.org/topics/consumer-confidence/.

Even under President Biden, widely regarded as one of the two most pro-union presidents in history (the other being President Franklin D. Roosevelt), and with a pro-worker National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and general counsel, federal labor law failed to adequately protect workers' rights to unionize. The fundamental reason: under the 1935 National Labor Relations Action (NLRA) as interpreted by 90 years of court decisions, U.S. employers have wide scope under the law to intimidate workers and use legal delays to avoid unionization. If they go beyond law, for example by firing workers for union activity, the penalties are a light slap on the wrist.

Despite rhetorically claiming to put American workers first, the Trump Administration has taken several decisive anti-union actions. In what Georgetown University labor historian Joseph McCartin called "by far the largest single action of union-busting in American history," the Trump Administration has sought to end collective bargaining rights for more than 4 in 5 federal workers under the guise of national security.[11] President Trump's attempted firing of NLRB Board member Gwynne Wilcox (currently being litigated) leaves the board with only two remaining members. Since this is less than a quorum, it hinders the Board's ability to rule on cases and gives anti-union employers even more freedom not to cooperate with proceedings related to unionization. (The NLRB ordinarily has five members but had two vacancies at the end of the Biden Administration. A quorum requires three members.)

While union coverage is low, in large part because of outdated labor law and employer hostility, public support for unions is high. It is also higher than it has been since the 1960s. A 2024 Gallup poll (we expect Gallup to release 2025 poll results at the end of August) showed that 70% of Americans approved of unions.[12] The Center for American Progress also found that younger people – Gen Z and younger Millennials – are the most supportive of unions, and more supportive of unions than other generations when they were young.[13] This support for unions crosses party lines. A majority of young Republicans support unions, the only Republican age demographic to do so. Part of the reason young people support unions is that they are too young to associate unions with manufacturing, the biggest sector in the New Deal economy. While older workers (and policymakers and even union leaders) – encouraged by

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[11] The McCartin quote is cited in Joe Davidson," Trump seeks court approval for most aggressive union-busting attempt ever," April 4, 2024; https://css.washingtonpost.com/politics/2025/04/04/trump-seeks-court-approval-most-aggressive-union-busting-attempt-ever/. See also Aurella Glass, "The Trump Administration Ended Collective Bargaining for 1 Million Federal Workers," Center for American Progress, May 22, 2025; https://www.americanprogress.org/article/the-trump-administration-ended-collective-bargaining-for-1-million-federal-workers/.

[12] Gallup, "Labor Unions," August 2024; https://news.gallup.com/poll/12751/labor-unions.aspx. The Economic Policy Institute documents that this disconnect between union support and low union also exists at the national level. Heidi Shierholz, Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, and Jennifer Sherer, "Workers want unions, but the latest data point to obstacles in their path", Economic Policy Institute, January 23, 2024; https://www.epi.org/publication/union-membership-data/#full-report.

[13] Aurelia Glass "Explaining Young Workers' Support for Unions", Center for American Progress https://www.americanprogress.org/article/explaining-young-workers-support-for-unions/

right-wing messaging – may believe (or fear) that unions are an anachronism, important in "the old economy" but not in the new, younger workers have no memory of U.S.-based manufacturing unionism or its decline. Confronted on the job with low wages, lack of voice and respect, and poor working conditions, young people are more likely to think, "hmm, I need a union."

The renewed belief in unions as a vehicle for lifting up workers goes along with two dimensions of recent organizing that foreshadow a possible wave of unionization like that in the late 1930s and 1940s. The first of those dimensions is area-wide organizing efforts in inherently local – mostly "service" – industries that cannot relocate because they have to remain near customers. You can't serve someone in Pennsylvania coffee, provide them with long-term care, or sell them perishable groceries from Tijuana or Beijing. Capital flight in response to worker organizing is simply not an option in many local industries, such as coffee shops, janitorial work and security guards, higher education, health care, grocery stores, hospitality, construction, and others.

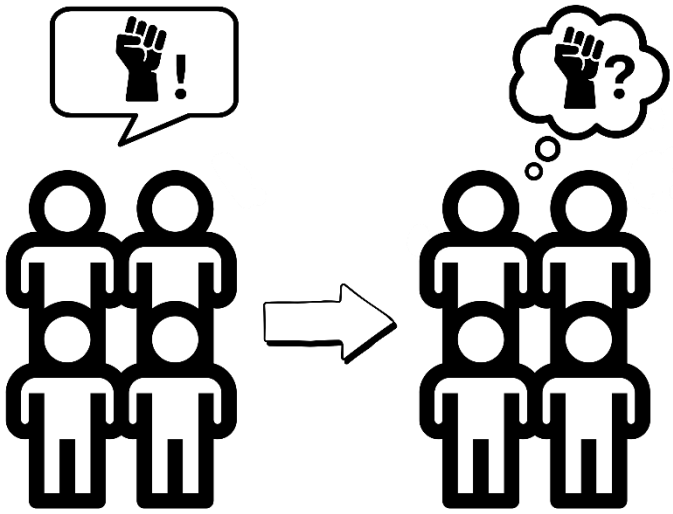
The second dimension of current unionization efforts that could facilitate a mass organizing wave is the effort to establish labor organizations in giant establishments – the modern "oligopolistic" service economy – such as Starbucks, Amazon, and, in health care in Pennsylvania, UPMC. The biggest service companies in inherently local industries may resist unionization intensively, as Starbucks did at first. But if and when workers unionize some establishments, it has the potential to spread throughout the company. Organizing in giant service companies can also have a contagion effect on other workers in the same sector or in other non-mobile sectors (Figure 17). In one scenario, organizing in local industries and in giant service corporations could interact to produce an organizing wave. The fundamental key to such a wave is that a critical mass of workers suddenly see unionization as a practical way to achieve better pay, working conditions, voice, and dignity at work. Organizing at different companies and in different sectors feeds on itself, as the case study on the "The Contagion Effect" observed in Philadelphia suggests. A massive contagion effect occurred in manufacturing in the New Deal, triggered in part by the General Motors sit-down strike at the end of 1937. Unionization at Ford and Chrysler followed unionization at General Motors. And unionization in other manufacturing sectors was also inspired in part by organization of the biggest auto companies.

Case Study:

"The Union Contagion Effect": Organizing at the University of Pennsylvania

When workers see their peers successfully organize, it increases confidence that they could organize for higher wages and better benefits, too. Organizing at the University of Pennsylvania illustrates this "union contagion effect."

Figure 17



The union "contagion" : seeing peers organize increases confidence others can, too.

Between 2021 and July 2025, student workers and staff at the University of Pennsylvania organized six new bargaining units. Penn's Museum Archaeology and Anthropology workers organized in 2021[14], medicine residents in May 2023[15], Resident Assistants (RA's) in September 2023[16], graduate students in May 2024[17], library staff in August 2024[18], and post-doctoral researchers in July 2025.[19]

Penn disputed the legality of the bargaining units, arguing that post-doctoral scholars were temporary employees and residential assistants were academics and not employees, and

[14] "Congratulations and Solidarity to Penn Museum Workers on Winning their Union!", *American Association of University Professors,* August 11th 2021. https://aaup-penn.org/congratulations-and-solidarity-to-penn-museum-workers-on-winning-their-union/

[15] "In the Largest Victory of its Kind in Philadelphia in Over 50 Years, Penn Doctors Overwhelmingly Vote to Unionize", *Committee of Interns and Residents SEIU Healthcare,* May 8th 2025. https://www.cirseiu.org/46629-2/

[16] Resident Advisors at the University of Pennsylvania win their union", *OPEIU Local 153,* October 2nd 2023. https://www.opeiulocal153.org/news/resident-advisors-at-the-university-of-pennsylvania-win-their-union

[17] Emily Scolnick "Overwhelming majority of Penn graduate student workers vote to unionize", *The Daily Pennsylvanian,* May 3rd 2024 https://www.thedp.com/article/2024/05/penn-graduate-student-workers-form-union

[18] Nick Daum, "Penn Libraries staff officially unionizes after months-long delay in election vote count", *The Daily Pennsylvanian,* October 30th 2024. https://www.thedp.com/article/2024/10/penn-libraries-united-win-unionization-election

[19] "Penn Postdocs and Research Associates Win Their Union", *United Auto Workers,* July 17th 2025. https://uaw.org/penn-postdocs-and-research-associates-win-their-union/

therefore not eligible to form a union. The NLRB disagreed, but the resulting legal procedures delayed the union representation election.

Despite employer opposition, several of the units at Penn negotiated first contracts, a feat considering that between 44% and 64% of new bargaining units do not negotiate a first contract within a year and 30% do not receive a contract in the first three years.[20] Penn Museum Workers United signed its first contract in June 2023[21], Penn's RA's negotiated theirs in June 2024[22], and the Committee of Interns and Residents at Penn ratified their first contract in September 2024.[23] All three first contracts included substantial pay and benefit increases. They helped make living and working in Philadelphia more manageable while ensuring employees have access to benefits such as increased meals for residential assistants and access to paid parental leave and limits on hours worked for residents. Penn Museum Workers United's first contract expired in June and Penn initially appeared to be stalling in negotiations for a new contract. In response, employees authorized a strike in July 2025 and a second contract was reached on July 30th according to Penn Museum Workers United's social media. [24]

In terms of contagion effects in Pennsylvania, the unionization of about 800 nurses at Magee Women's Hospital could have profound effects.[25] UPMC employs over 20,000 nurses and nursing support staff and has 100,000 staff members.[26] The hospital sector in Pennsylvania has over 200,000 employees. The health care and educational services sector has over 1.4 million workers.[27] While much of educational services is already unionized, significant organizing (as the University of Pennsylvania example shows, along with the University of Pittsburgh, organized recently by the United Steelworkers) is taking place currently in the partly organized higher education sectors.

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[20] Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, and John Schmitt, "Workers are winning elections, but it can take years to get their first contract.", *Economic Policy Institute,* May 1st 2023. https://www.epi.org/publication/union-first-contract-fact-sheet/

[21] Maya Pontone, "Penn Museum Workers Vote to Authorize Strike", *Hyperallergic,* July 9th 2025. https://hyperallergic.com/1026904/penn-museum-workers-vote-to-authorize-strike/

[22] Jessica Wu, "Penn resident advisor union unanimously ratifies first contract", *The Daily Pennsylvanian,* June 11th 2024. https://www.thedp.com/article/2024/06/penn-resident-advisor-union-members-ratify-first-contract

[23]" Penn Resident Doctors Secure Historic Tentative Deal on First Contract", *Committee of Interns and Residents, SEIU Healthcare,* September 25th 2024. https://www.cirseiu.org/penn-resident-doctors-secure-historic-tentative-deal-on-first-contract/

[24] "Penn Museum Contract Ratified!" Philly Cultural Workers United's Instagram. July 30th 2025. https://www.instagram.com/p/DMvEHecRbD_/?img_index=3

[25] Mike Darney and Barry Pintar, "Nearly 1,000 UPMC Magee-Womens Hospital nurses vote to unionize *CBS Pittsburgh*, August 26, 2025; https://www.cbsnews.com/pittsburgh/news/magee-womens-hospital-nurses-vote-to-unionize/.

[26] UPMC, "Nursing at UPMC," no date, https://www.upmc.com/careers/nursing. UPMC, "UMPC Facts and Stats," no date, https://www.upmc.com/about/facts.

[27] Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Economy at a Glance: Pennsylvania," https://www.bls.gov/eag/eag.pa.htm.

Policies For or Against Working Families

Our review of the economic data in this report reveals that, in the last year, labor market conditions have become somewhat less favorable for Pennsylvania workers. As we said at the outset, the main suspects that could explain this deterioration are federal policy shifts.

Tariffs and uncertainty about tariffs have likely contributed to the small increase in inflation and to reduced private investment. Companies are wary of building new factories when they don't know if the tariffs that protect them against foreign imports will be 100% or zero in three years when product starts coming off the line.[28] Layoffs of federal workers, discussed in the jobs section of this report, have had a direct negative impact on employment. Raids targeting immigrants and deportations reduced employment of foreign-born workers in the United States by nearly 1.5 million (from 32.2 to 30.8 million) from the March 2025 peak to July 2025.[29] And while reduced foreign-born labor supply may have increased demand for native-born workers somewhat, it has also likely slowed total job growth but not tightened the overall labor market enough to reduce unemployment or drive up wages.

Given the scale of federal policy shifts since President Trump took office for the second time, their limited impact on the economy and labor market could be seen as surprising. The three policies described above – tariffs, federal worker layoffs, and immigration crackdowns – only recently began to go into effect. Cancellations of grants and tax credits for clean energy and manufacturing projects have also only started and will be phased in over time, with potentially big negative impacts on investment, growth, competitiveness, and the climate (see Box 1). [30]

Cuts in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) – food assistance for low-income families – are about to go into effect and cuts in Medicaid won't phase in until after the 2026 elections.[31] Lower funding for both these programs will reduce incomes for the poorest fifth of Pennsylvanians, while the tax cuts extended by the reconciliation bill

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[28] Federal Reserve Bank economists estimated that, in President Trump's first term, "…uncertainty about trade policy in 2018 may have lowered aggregate U.S. investment by 1 percent." See Dario Caldara et al., "The Economic Effects of Trade Policy Uncertainty," Federal Reserve Board, November 3, 2019 https://clausen.berkeley.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Economic-Effects-of-Trade-Policy-TPU_PAPER_final.pdf. Uncertainty about trade policy in President Trump's second term, of course, has far exceeded that in his first term.

[29] Compare Table A-7 in the Bureau of Labor Statistics' "Employment Situation" report for March 2025 (https://www.bls.gov/news.release/archives/empsit_04042025.htm) and July 2025 (https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf).

[30] For details on the increases in federal funding and private investment stimulated by federal climate infrastructure and innovation legislation during the Biden Administration – increases now potentially at risk of partial reversal – see Diana Polson and Rike Rothenstein, "If You Fund It, They Will Come: How Federal Clean Energy and Manufacturing Funds Spurred Private Spending, Doubling Appalachia's Climate Infrastructure Investment in Coal Country," Keystone Research Center and ReImagine Appalachia, April 9, 2025; https://reimagineappalachia.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/If-You-Fund-it-They-Will-Come_04_2025.pdf.

[31] Community Legal Services of Philadelphia, "SNAP Rules in Pennsylvania Are Changing," August 1, 2025; https://clsphila.org/highlights/snap-rules-in-pennsylvania-are-changing/.

overwhelmingly benefit the very rich.[32] Reduced SNAP benefits will also put thousands of grocery industry and farming jobs on the line.[33] Cuts to Medicaid may put an additional up to 60,000 Pennsylvania healthcare jobs at risk.[34]

The full impact of reduced funding for research and Universities could take a decade to materialize – and be difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle from other impacts on long-term economic performance.

The cumulative impacts of all the Federal changes enacted by the Trump Administration and U.S. Congress since the start of the year, including the attacks on federal workers' unions and unions more broadly (discussed in our section on unions), will be to rig the economy further against working families. They seem likely to result in greater inequality. But if one shift in policies could result in more economic hard times for working families, another could push back towards shared prosperity.

Of course, large-scale shifts in policies, whether at the state or federal level, happen after elections. In this moment, we recommend one state and one federal policy that might be achievable in the current Pennsylvania legislature and the current U.S. Congress. And we suggest a third policy that does not require legislation while laying the groundwork for future legislative change.

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[32] For a look at the combined distributional impacts of Medicaid cuts and the reconciliation bill's tax provisions, see Josh Bivens, Hilary Wething, and Monique Morrissey, "Cutting Medicaid to pay for low taxes on the rich is a terrible trade for American families," Economic Policy Institute, February 28, 2025; https://www.epi.org/publication/cutting-medicaid-for-low-taxes-on-the-rich-is-terrible-for-american-families/. While written before the passage of the reconciliation bill, the analysis models provisions similar to those that became law.

[33] Over 10,000 Pennsylvania retail locations accept SNAP for food purchase, and SNAP is responsible for 12,306 Pennsylvania grocery industry jobs and an additional 6,754 jobs in supporting industries including agriculture, manufacturing, transportation, and municipal services. See *National Grocers Association*, "New Economic Data Underscores SNAP's Critical Role in Supporting American Jobs and Local Economies," May 6th 2025; https://www.nationalgrocers.org/news/new-economic-data-underscores-snaps-critical-role-in-supporting-american-jobs-and-local-economies/. See also Arianna Perez-Castells "139,000 Pa. Jobs at Risk", *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, July 3, 2025: https://www.inquirer.com/business/a/big-beautiful-bill-spending-pennsylvania-job-cut-20250703.html; and Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, "Shapiro Administration Highlights Vital Role SNAP Plays in Supporting Our Economy, Fighting Hunger as Congressional Republicans Propose Cuts to Food Assistance for 140,000 of Pennsylvanians", June 2nd 2025. https://www.pa.gov/agencies/dhs/newsroom/shapiro-administration-highlights-vital-role-snap-plays-in-suppo; Over 10,000 (10,400) authorized retail locations in PA accept SNAP benefits on electronic benefit transfer cards: https://www.cbpp.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/snap_factsheet_pennsylvania.pdf.

[34] 139,000 Pa. Jobs at Risk", The Philadelphia Inquirer, July 3, 2025: https://www.inquirer.com/business/a/big-beautiful-bill-spending-pennsylvania-job-cut-20250703.html

Box 1

Federal Infrastructure, Climate, and Innovation Policies Contributed to a Tripling of Private Construction Spending in Manufacturing: Is That Increase Now at Risk?

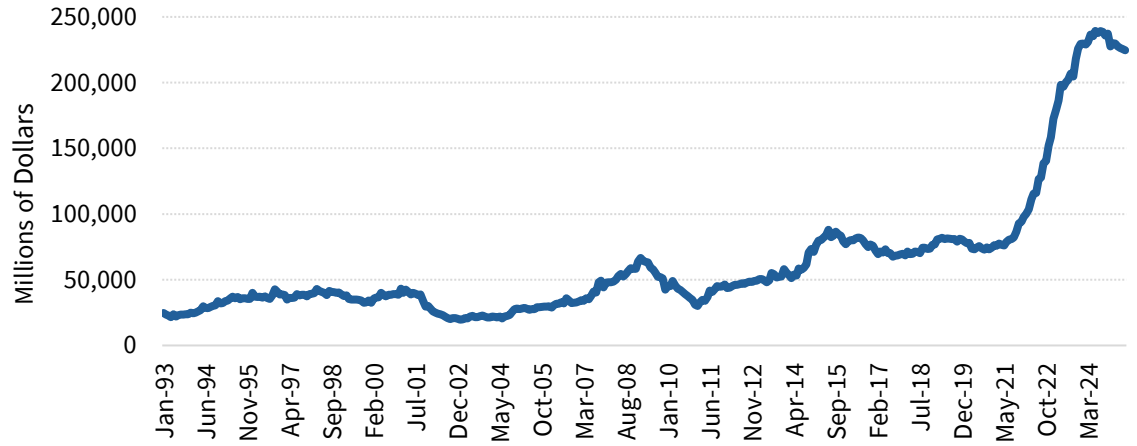
What will be the long-term impact the cuts in federal grants and tax credits for clean energy and manufacturing and other investments that reduce carbon emissions within this year's federal "reconciliation bill" (also known as H.R. 1 and as P.L. 119-21)? One indication is the *positive* impact of those subsidies (in the 2022 federal Inflation Reduction Act) combined with infrastructure investments (in the 2021 bipartisan infrastructure law or BIL) and the CHIPS and Science Act (also 2022).

The Figure 18 show that, since 2021, private construction spending in U.S. manufacturing has tripled from about $80 billion per year to a peak of about $240 billion per year in mid-2024. This spending dipped back to $225 billion (at an annual rate) by mid-2025. Does that dip foreshadow a return of spending a substantial part of the way back to 2021 levels? That's an experiment we're now running as national policy – unless Congress decides to reverse the cuts to the tax credits.

Figure 18

Total Private Construction Spending on Manufacturing in the United States

Seasonally Adjusted Annual Rate, January 1993-June 2025



Source: Keystone Research Center analysis of data from U.S. Census Bureau, Total Construction Spending: Manufacturing in the United States, Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis series: PRMFGCONS

First, Pennsylvania lawmakers should finally enact that $15 per hour minimum wage. Legislative and other advocates for that increase need to communicate effectively the $16,000 per full-time worker lost because of the failure to emulate $15 per hour minimum age neighboring states. They also need to communicate the over $200 million for each PA Senate district or $50 million for each PA House district that workers have lost because their representatives won't act.

Second, bipartisan groups of U.S. House and Senate members should seek to extend the deadlines for clean energy and manufacturing tax credits in the Inflation Reduction Act back to their original deadlines. There is ample evidence that many "red" Congressional Districts will significantly lose out because of cuts in subsidies clean energy and manufacturing. This,

along with signs of the economy sliding further into recession, could increase Republican support for resurrecting the full IRA tax credits. One procedural mechanism that might force a U.S. House vote despite House Speaker opposition would be a "discharge petition" signed by a majority of House members.

Third, local, state, and federal elected officials supportive of workers' union rights should counter the Trump Administration's assault on labor. When lawmakers can't enact legislative changes, they can support union organizing using the "bully pulpit." They can spread the story, for example, about the unionization of 800 nurses at Magee Women's Hospital this past Saturday (August 23, 2025), and how this may herald broader organizing at UPMC, in acute health care, and across other local service industries that have to stay near their customers. State and federal lawmakers should also craft legislation that could help birth an upsurge in union organizing and a second New Deal – to be ready in 2027 and 2029 if legislative opportunities present themselves. (On possible state action, see Box 2).

Box 2

Pennsylvania Lawmakers Should Update the 2019 PA Workers Bill of Rights

To protect the right to unionize at the state-level given an increasingly employer-friendly federal landscape, Pennsylvania lawmakers should update pro-worker legislation like the Pennsylvania Worker's Bill of Rights, introduced in 2019.[A] An updated bill could include pro-union reforms passed in other states in recent years, including allowing striking workers to receive unemployment benefits, outlawing captive audience meetings, and allowing unions to have access to lists of members, including new hires. New York and New Jersey workers can receive unemployment benefits while on strike.[B] An additional nine states allow workers to receive unemployment benefits while on strike if the employer violated labor law, and over a dozen states have banned captive audience meetings.[C] Drafting an updated package aimed at boosting worker organizing would complement use of the bully pulpit by signaling that lawmakers have workers' and unions' backs. It could also set the stage for quick legislative action in a possible future legislature.

[A] See Footnote 27 of "State of Working Pennsylvania 2022" by the Keystone Research Center, https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED624091.pdf

[B] "Unemployment Insurance for Striking Workers", *National Employment Law Project*, October 21st, 2024. https://www.nelp.org/insights-research/unemployment-insurance-for-striking-workers/

[C] Captive audience meetings are currently banned at the federal level, however this decision is extremely vulnerable to change under the Trump administration's more employer-friendly NLRB. This statistic comes from "The State of Captive Audience Meetings Bans in the States", *LaborLab,* December 31st, 2024. https://laborlab.us/the-state-of-captive-audience-meetings-bans-in-the-states/

In the end, Pennsylvanians and Americans author our own economic story. To make sure it ends well, we need to win the arguments about what policies serve the public good, and we need to elect lawmakers who are committed to shared prosperity rather than an economy that favors corporations and the 1%.