



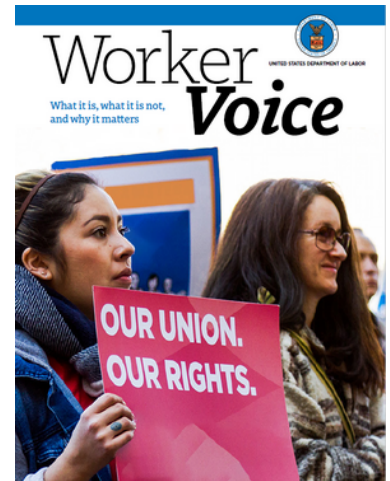
Worker Voice: What it is, what it isn't, and why it matters

WORKER VOICE AT ILAB

The Bureau of International Labor Affairs (ILAB) uses trade policy, research, labor diplomacy, and technical assistance to strengthen global labor standards; advance labor rights; and combat international child labor, forced labor, and human trafficking. We engage with governments, workers, civil society, and the private sector to promote the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining in the pursuit of good jobs for all.

WORKER VOICE DEFINED

Worker voice is the ability of workers to come together, collectively articulate their demands, and seek better terms and conditions of work. It is a bedrock principle of labor relations. Freedom of association and the right to collective are core enabling rights that are essential to effective worker voice. When those rights are weakened by informal or precarious workplaces, adverse labor laws, or weak enforcement, worker voice is at risk. Together with the Pennsylvania State University's Center for Global Workers' Rights and ICF International, ILAB carried out extensive research on what is and what is not true worker voice and why it is critical to make this distinction. The research identified six core components of worker voice. Labor, employers, and governments all have a role to play to ensure the conditions for genuine worker voice to thrive.



1 Elect

Workers must be able to act together to form worker-driven organizations that democratically elect their leaders free from interference by employers or the government.

2 Represent

Workers need to be informed of their rights, engaged, and mobilized for action. Leaders must be fully accountable to their members and responsible for consulting them on key matters.

3 Include

Organizations and their leadership should be fully inclusive and address obstacles to full representation and participation of the diverse workforce in their ranks, including diversity of race, gender, and status.

4 Protect

Workers must be protected from retaliation when using their voices, including protection from firing, deportation, abuse, harassment, threats, violence, and coercion.

5 Enable

Workers need to be given the time, space, and information to organize, train, and engage in bargaining practices that lead to the fulfillment of their rights.

6 Empower

Workers must be empowered by labor laws, leveraging binding actions to advance their objectives, and must have the power to strike and participate in the grievances and remedy process.

Worker Voice is Critical

Strong labor movements are essential for healthy, inclusive democracies.

Independent and democratic trade unions **provide workers a collective voice in their workplaces, communities, and political systems.** Unions and other worker-centered organizations make it possible for workers to defend their rights, advance their interests, improve wages and working conditions, and have a voice in the policies that affect their lives.

Evidence shows that worker organizations, through collective bargaining, policy advocacy and social dialogue, campaigning, solidarity, and mutual support **advance equality, racial and gender equity, good jobs, and healthier and safer workplaces.** Acting collectively through their organizations, workers have also played a critical role in reducing child labor and forced labor.

Worker voice **contributes to a culture and practice of democracy.** When authentic worker voice exists, workers participate in collective efforts to elect their representatives, identify problems, propose solutions, negotiate agreements, and hold parties accountable – democracy in action, at work. And workers whose rights and livelihoods are secure have the stability to be engaged citizens beyond the workplace, in the community and the broader political sphere.

However, **these activities are not carried out without risk.** When workers organize and bargain collectively, they seek to alter power dynamics. In some cases, employers and governments may try to influence workers in their decision-making, dominate or undermine their organizations, or discourage workers from exercising their rights. This can include threats, violence, incarceration, and even killing of workers and trade unionists for carrying out what should be protected activities.

Workers have fundamental rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. People in power—in government, companies, and the international community—have a duty to ensure that workers can access and exercise these rights.



Worker empowerment is essential to the advancement of sustainable economic growth, inclusive international development, human rights, democratic resilience, fair competition, and growing a strong middle class in the United States and abroad.

- Presidential Memorandum on Advancing Worker Empowerment, Rights, and High Labor Standards Globally



Scan to learn more about worker voice and read the literature review, report, and case studies.