The U.S. House of Representatives today will vote on the Protecting the Right to Organize Act of 2019, or PRO Act, the most serious congressional effort to bolster the U.S. labor movement since the failed Employee Free Choice Act of 2009. The PRO Act includes more provisions than its 2009 predecessor to make it easier for unions to organize new workers and workplaces, and ensure U.S. workers receive fair wages and good working conditions. This reflects the increasing recognition of the role a vibrant U.S. labor movement must play in pushing back on the long-term trend of rising income inequality.

This concern is echoed by the range of labor market policy proposals from Democratic presidential campaigns. The PRO Act would address important structural policy barriers that keep workers from joining unions. Recent research from the Washington Center for Equitable Growth’s network of academics and grantees demonstrates that if the PRO Act did succeed in allowing more workers to fulfill their desire to join unions, this would ensure more equitable and efficient labor markets. Specifically:

- The PRO Act would broadly address the current power imbalance between workers and owners in the U.S. labor market.
  - The research: History demonstrates the important role of unions in balancing income inequality. Compiled new historical data shows that there has been an inverse relationship between union density and income inequality from 1936 to the present. Monopsony in particular is becoming an increasing concern in the labor market, where employers have the market power to undercut workers’ wages. Unions play a critical role in tempering this exploitation.
  - Government support for collective action by workers via unions is critical to reducing so-called rents to firms and ultimately will increase overall social efficiency, with more workers employed at higher wages that actually equal their productivity.
  - The PRO Act clarifies that workers have a right to strike under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.
    - The research: Exposure to the 2018 Red for Ed teacher strikes made families of school-age children more likely to support teacher strikes subsequently and even to consider taking collective action in their own workplaces.
    - Strikes have had many benefits for workers, but their use has declined precipitously since the 1970s. Strikes are the leverage point to ensure that workers have the bargaining power to share in economic
growth with their employers. The PRO Act clarifies
that the First Amendment encompasses the right to
perform a “secondary” boycott or strike in solidarity
with another union and further, that striking workers
cannot be permanently replaced by their employer.

The PRO Act makes it easier for interested
workers to organize into a union through fair
elections.

The research: A recent study examines what
aspects of unions workers would value, finding that
nonunionized workers are increasingly interested in
union representation in their workplaces and that
workers prioritize collective bargaining as a crucial
role for unions.

The expansion of the ability of unions to organize
would give more workers access to collective
bargaining over their pay and working conditions.
The PRO Act reinforces this by instituting proper
restitution for workers when employers violate their
rights, punishing illegal election interference, and by
facilitating quick and efficient collective bargaining
agreements once a union has been formed.

The PRO Act cracks down on employers
misclassifying their workers as independent
contractors and other abuses.

The research: Studies on domestic outsourcing
and the fissured workplace shows that businesses
subcontracting out their workforce leads to lower
wages and fewer opportunities for workers and
declining job quality.

Independent contracting lowers wages and allows
large companies to retain control over their labor
force without any responsibility to the workers,
especially among franchises in the fast food industry.
This has resulted in an unbalanced labor market,