

Executive Summary

Today, people in cities all across the country are working together toward a shared vision of healthy, vibrant communities with stable homes and good jobs. But while they do their work in public, building our democracy, their opponents are at work in ways that are harder to see. Using local and state associations, massive corporations and their overwhelmingly white, male leadership are driving forward a strategy to keep wages low and rents high by stripping away local democratic power. The burdens of these actions fall heaviest on women, people of color and LGBTQ individuals, a greater share of whom earn low wages and pay unaffordable rents compared to their white counterparts.

This report focuses on five states—Tennessee, Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Michigan and Colorado—where people’s campaigns are underway to challenge corporations’ hold on democracy and allow cities to protect workers and tenants. The report unmask the corporations driving the deregulation of their industries and trying to ensure that local organizing cannot translate into better laws. Across those states, we found:

- Large national and statewide corporations like Kroger, Giant and Greystar Real Estate hold leadership positions in the state and local associations that fight for deregulation of wages and rents.
- Some of these corporations in leadership positions employ significant numbers of low-wage workers and own or manage thousands of rental housing units in the five states.
- The corporate leaders holding power within these associations are overwhelmingly white men, some earning millions in annual income, whereas women, people of color and LGBTQ individuals are dramatically overrepresented among the low-wage workers and tenants most adversely impacted by deregulation of rents and wages.
- Several of the corporations leading harmful state deregulation efforts in the states have relationships with American Legislative Exchange Council

(ALEC), one of the architects of the strategy of passing corporate-driven state laws that block local worker and tenant protections.

- Among all the corporations examined, AT&T and Comcast appear most often in the report, as they hold leadership positions in chambers of commerce in Pennsylvania, Louisiana and Tennessee, maintain ties with ALEC, and employ significant numbers of lobbyists in all three states.

In addition, we observed important developments in the individual states:

- In Tennessee, massive corporate employers like Kroger, Publix and Dollar General and some of the nation’s largest corporate landlords like Lincoln Properties and Bell Partners are working through state and local chambers of commerce and apartment associations to preserve deregulation. These corporations have successfully lobbied for and maintained a system with no state or local minimum wages or requirements to provide paid sick days, all while employing thousands of low wage workers and failing to provide paid sick days to huge portions of their workforce. This system also prohibits any limitations on private rents or any requirement to include affordable units in new residential projects. In the midst of a statewide housing affordability crisis and pandemic, the results have been devastating for people across the state, particularly for women and people of color.
- In Pennsylvania, large corporations, many of them household names like Giant, Eat’n Park, Save-a-Lot and Wawa, occupy important leadership roles in the Pennsylvania Chamber of Business and Industry, which lobbies to maintain the state’s brutal combination of a \$7.25 minimum wage and complete ban on local minimum wages. These same corporations themselves employ thousands of low-wage workers in the state. Their grip on state policy helps explain why over 70 percent of low wage workers in Philadelphia cannot afford their rent.
- In Louisiana, a few rich, powerful white men, including Lane Grigsby and Art Favre, have

helped maintain a ruthless set of economic rules through the Louisiana Association of Business and Industry (LABI). LABI, which has argued there should be no regulation of wages of any kind, has made this vision a reality in its state. LABI has helped hold in place the nation's longest-lasting prohibition on local minimum wages, coupled with no state minimum wage. This scheme harms many: Black workers, who comprise more than half of the state's minimum wage workers; women, who work under the worst gender pay gap in the U.S.; and LGBTQ individuals, 30 percent of whom live in poverty.

- In Colorado and Michigan, others of the nation's largest landlords, including Greystar, BH Management and Edward Rose and Sons, have worked through state and local apartment

associations to obtain and preserve prohibitions on local rent control. These landlords, along with other corporations in leadership of the apartment associations, own and manage tens of thousands of apartments in the two states. With neither state nor local ceilings on the rents they can charge, these landlords operate in a system that takes a severe economic toll on Black and Latinx renters. Over half of Latinx renters in Colorado and nearly 60 percent of all renters in Detroit (who are overwhelmingly Black) are cost-burdened.

By exposing these corporations and their harmful, anti-democratic actions, this report aims to help the many people organizing to challenge corporate interference in their states, cities and towns and return the basic instruments of democracy to those who need them most.

