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American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations



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FOR BACKGROUND

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Facts About Working Women

More women are working than ever before. But as the pressures grow in trying to juggle work and family, make ends meet, and find respect and opportunity on the job, women are looking for solutions to their problems on the job. Increasingly, they are turning to unions.

More and more women workers

The number of women entering the paid workforce has increased steadily over the past five decades.

- In 1948, there were 16.617 million employed women, representing 28.5 percent of all employed workers.
- In 1972, there were 31.257 million employed women, representing 38 percent of all employed workers.
- In 1995, there were 60 million employed women, representing 46.1 percent of all employed workers. (Employment and Earnings. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Various years.)

Ninety-nine of every 100 women will work for pay at some time in their lives. The majority of women work for pay, regardless of their family status.

- Seventy-six percent of women with school-aged children and 60 percent of women with children under the age of 6 are members of the labor force. (Care Around the Clock: Developing Child Care Resources Before Nine and After Five. U.S. Department of Labor. 1995.)
- BLS data show that 58.9 percent of all women in 1995 were in the workforce.

The number of families maintained by women has also increased.

- In 1970, there were 5.6 million families maintained by women.
- In 1992, there were more than double that -- 12 million families were maintained by women. Nonetheless, in 1992, 56 percent of the women who maintained families were employed. (Women Who Maintain Families. U.S. Department of Labor. June 1993.)

Unions benefit working women

There are many reasons women choose to organize and join unions, including that wages for women in unions are higher than for their nonunion counterparts.

- In 1996, female union workers earned 38 percent more than nonunion women.
- Black female union workers earned 44 percent more than Black female nonunion workers.
- Hispanic female union workers earned 43 percent more than Hispanic female nonunion workers. (Union Members in 1996. BLS. January 1997.)

Unions also work to increase equality in wages between women and men.

- In 1996, the wage gap between men and women was 75 percent; that is, women earned 75 cents for every dollar earned by men.
- For union women and men, the wage gap was 84 percent -- union women earned 84 cents for every dollar earned by union men. (Union Members in 1996. BLS. January 1997.)

Union workers in the private sector also enjoy greater benefits than nonunion women. For example:

- Union workers receive \$1.17 more per hour worked for health insurance than do nonunion workers.
- Union workers receive \$.59 more per hour worked for paid leave than do nonunion workers.
- Union workers receive \$.49 more per hour worked for vacation pay than do nonunion workers.
- Union workers receive \$.04 more per hour worked for sick leave than do nonunion workers.

Gender Gap in Organizing

Women make up a growing percentage of union membership.

- In 1960, women made up 18 percent of union membership.
- In 1972, that number had grown to 22 percent.
- By 1996, 39 percent of all union members were women.

Polls consistently show a gender gap amongst unrepresented workers and their attitudes toward organizing and belonging to labor unions. Women have consistently been more in favor of forming a union at their worksite than have men.

- A poll conducted in 1996 by Peter Hart and The Mellman Group showed that women are significantly more supportive of the basic ideal behind labor unions, that workers should join together to achieve their goals, rather than relying on themselves. The survey showed that 42 percent of nonunion women workers would vote for a union if the election were held tomorrow.
- The Peter Hart poll showed that 7 percent more women than men said they would definitely or probably vote for a union. This type of gender gap has been seen consistently in surveys over the past 12 years.

- The survey findings indicate that women favor workers joining together over relying on themselves by 55 to 37 percent. This compares to 48 percent of men who believe people need to rely on themselves rather than joining together (38 percent).

Women are more likely than men to vote for unions

Kate Bronfenbrenner, director of Labor Education Research at Cornell University's School of Industrial and Labor Relations, has conducted extensive research related to union representation elections. She has found that in the mid-1980s, almost half of all workers attempting to organize under the National Labor Relations Board were women. During this same period, units with a majority of women were associated with dramatically higher win rates -- 53 percent compared to 35 percent for units with a majority of men and 33 percent for more mixed units. These win rates were higher for women across a wide range of units, industries, occupations and wage rates.

By the end of the 1980s, Bronfenbrenner says close to 50,000 newly organized private sector women workers were gaining representation through NLRB elections every year.

Bronfenbrenner concluded that, "...given the opportunity, women are consistently more likely to vote for unions than their male counterparts."

Even though the majority of workers being organized in the 1990s have been men, the win rates in units with a majority of women workers continue to be significantly higher in service sector units such as health care (61 percent), education (67 percent), and other services (73 percent) where women predominate. It also is important to note that more and more workers are being organized in the '90s outside the traditional NLRB election process. Even though there has been no comprehensive research conducted on non-NLRB organizing, and therefore no statistics on numbers of workers organized, Bronfenbrenner says that the number is increasing each year, and that most of these types of campaigns are concentrated in service sector occupations where women predominate.

"When workers who gain representation through non-NLRB campaigns are added to those who organize under the NLRB, women continue to represent the majority of private sector workers being organized," she says.

Organizing women

The AFL-CIO, with 5.6 million women members, can be a powerful voice for working women. The new AFL-CIO leadership intends to make that happen. When John Sweeney was elected president of the AFL-CIO in 1995, he brought with him the belief that America's working women are the future of the labor movement. One of his very first actions as president was to create the Working Women's Department at the AFL-CIO to "inject the issues and concerns of working women into every nook and cranny" of the labor movement and to become an activist voice for all working women.