

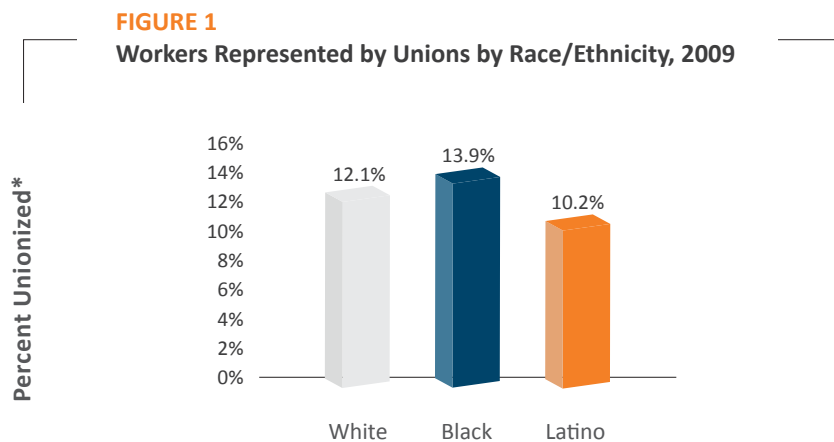
## HOW IMPORTANT IS UNIONIZATION TO LATINOS?

### INTRODUCTION

The labor movement has historically enabled workers to organize for positive change in the workplace by compelling employers to abide by the law and strive to improve job quality.\* Union membership and coverage by a collective bargaining agreement have been proven to boost low-skilled workers' wages and benefits, but in 2009, barely two million Hispanic† workers were represented by a union, as opposed to more than 13 million White workers.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Latinos are the least likely to belong to unions, but they have the most to gain in wages and benefits from union membership. Increasing opportunities for Hispanic workers to join unions is one of several actions critical to elevating job quality for Latinos.‡

### LATINOS UNDERREPRESENTED IN UNIONS

**Hispanic workers have the lowest unionization rate of any demographic group.** In 2009, only about one in ten (10.2%) Latino workers belonged to a union, compared to 12.1% of White workers and 13.9% of Black workers (see Figure 1).<sup>2</sup>



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, "40. Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by selected characteristics." *Current Population Survey*. Conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Washington, DC, 2009, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat40.pdf> (accessed April 2010).

\* Percent unionized includes workers who are members of a union or whose jobs are covered by a union or an employee association contract.

\* This fact sheet was prepared by the National Council of La Raza (NCLR), the largest national Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization in the United States.

† The terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" are used interchangeably by the U.S. Census Bureau and throughout this document to refer to persons of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central and South American, Dominican, Spanish, and other Hispanic descent; they may be of any race.

‡ Unless otherwise noted, all statistical information herein was derived by NCLR. For more information on these and related data, please see Catherine Singley, *Fractures in the Foundation: The Latino Worker's Experience in an Era of Declining Job Quality* (Washington, DC: National Council of La Raza, 2009), [www.nclr.org/content/publications/detail/59227](http://www.nclr.org/content/publications/detail/59227) (accessed April 2010).

**Hispanic workers constitute a greater share of the contingent workforce than they do the overall workforce.** The practice of hiring workers on a contingent basis rather than through a time-delimited contract is a growing trend among employers wishing to avoid compensating and insuring traditional wage-and-salary employees who could join unions.\*<sup>3</sup> Between 1995 and 2005,<sup>†</sup> the Latino presence among contingent workers jumped from 12.7% to 21.4%.<sup>‡4</sup>

**Latino immigrants are even less likely to belong to a union.** Between 2004 and 2007, the overall Hispanic unionization rate averaged 11.1%, while unionization rate of foreign-born Latinos hovered around 8.5%.<sup>5</sup>

## THE POWER OF UNION MEMBERSHIP

**Latinos gain more from union membership compared to other workers.** The union wage premium for Hispanics is the highest of any racial or ethnic group; Hispanic men in unions earn 23.4% more than their nonunionized counterparts, and Hispanic women earn 18.7% more. By comparison, the union wage premium is 15% for White men, 9.1% for White women, 22.7% for Black men, and 14.5% for Black women.<sup>6</sup>

**Unionized Hispanics are more likely to have health insurance and other employer-sponsored benefits than their nonunionized counterparts.** Unionized low-wage Hispanic workers experience a 40.7% health coverage premium. The union premium for pension coverage is 53.9%.<sup>7</sup> Union members also tend to have better access to disability and life insurance, as well as paid leave.

**Unions give vulnerable workers a voice on the job.** Without access to affordable and culturally and linguistically appropriate legal resources, low-wage and limited-English-proficient workers face barriers to defending themselves against labor law violations.<sup>8</sup> Armed with technical expertise about regulations and protected from the threat of adverse reaction from employers, unions are equipped to take action on behalf of workers. They are an important watchdog in ensuring that employers comply with laws governing minimum wage, overtime pay, and occupational health and safety.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Improve access to unions for Latino workers.** Better union outreach and recruitment of Latino and immigrant workers will improve the Hispanic unionization rate. In addition, strengthening protections for workers who choose to unionize, such as the “Employee Free Choice Act” (H.R. 1409/S. 560), can help more Latinos organize.

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\* In reaction to growing global competition and soaring health insurance premiums, many businesses have cut costs by eliminating benefits for their employees. However, there is debate about whether contingent workers actually do cost less than their permanent counterparts.

† In 1999, just 5.9% of contingent workers were unionized, compared to 14.8% of noncontingent workers. There is notable variation between industries, however. Construction unions have successfully organized contingent workers at a rate of 22.6%, perhaps due to workers’ reliance on unions for stability in a job market that is traditionally transient.

‡ Only 9.4% of contingent workers had employer-provided health insurance in 2005, and only 4.6% were included in an employment-based retirement plan.

### **Support community-based organizing structures for nonunionized and nontraditional workers.**

Community-based organizations have proposed and tested various strategies to unite contingent and vulnerable workers to defend themselves against exploitative work practices. Some organizing campaigns target specific occupations (e.g., dressmakers), or entire production or subcontracting chains (e.g., the garment industry), or are geographically focused on low-income neighborhoods.<sup>9</sup>

**Encourage collaboration between unions and alternative organizing bodies.** It is important to note that while new organizing models sometimes arise in the absence of unions, a community-based approach does not necessarily exclude union involvement. In fact, the success of such campaigns often depends on funding and support from unions. Unions have an important stake in the outcome of community-based organizing, since workers involved in nontraditional campaigns often go on to be union organizers themselves.<sup>10</sup>

### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, “40. Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by selected characteristics.” *Current Population Survey*. Conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Washington, DC, 2009, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat40.pdf> (accessed April 2010).

<sup>2</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, “40. Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by selected characteristics.” *Current Population Survey*. Conducted by the Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Washington, DC, 2009, <http://www.bls.gov/cps/cpsaat40.pdf> (accessed April 2010).Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Employer Health Insurance Costs and Worker Compensation* (Menlo Park, CA: Kaiser Family Foundation, 2008), <http://www.kff.org/insurance/snapshot/chcm030808oth.cfm> (accessed May 2008); Kathleen Barker and Kathleen Christensen, *Contingent Work: American Employment Relations in Transition* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Contingent and Alternative Work Arrangements, February 2005,” news release, July 27, 2005, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/conemp.pdf> (accessed September 2008); U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, “Contingent Worker and Alternative Employment Supplement, 1995.” *Current Population Survey*. Conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Washington, DC, 1995, <http://www.bls.census.gov/cps/contwkr/1995/sdata.htm> (accessed September 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Unpublished estimates from the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, DC.

<sup>6</sup> Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein, and Heidi Shierholz, *The State of Working America 2008–2009* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 201.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, 202.

<sup>8</sup> Abel Valenzuela Jr. et al., *On the Corner: Day Labor in the United States* (Los Angeles, CA: UCLA Center for the Study of Urban Poverty, 2006), [http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/csup/uploaded\\_files/Natl\\_DayLabor-On\\_the\\_Corner1.pdf](http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/issr/csup/uploaded_files/Natl_DayLabor-On_the_Corner1.pdf) (accessed September 2007).

<sup>9</sup> Edna Bonacich and Fernando Gapsin, *Organizing the Unorganizable* (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Institute for Labor and Employment, 2001), <http://www.irlle.ucla.edu/research/scl/pdf01/scl2001ch15.pdf> (accessed June 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.