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Latino Working Class: Essential Work, Unequal Returns

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For the nearly 38.5 million Latino¹ adults who are part of America's working class,² wages are not supplemental income or a stepping stone. They are the primary — and often only — way to pay rent, put food on the table and care for family members, providing the foundation for daily life.

As documented in the first brief in this series, Latino Working Class: America's Economic Engine, Latinos represent nearly 20% of the total U.S. workforce, and about 80% of all Latino adults in the United States are working class.³ This brief builds upon those findings by examining the contributions of this group to private industry and the U.S. economy, as well as the challenges they face at work.

Latinos work in essential industries in the United States. They power farms and factories, build homes and infrastructure, prepare and serve food, and take care of our seniors and those who are sick. Latinos are also one of the youngest and fastest-growing segments of the U.S. working class, making up a large share of new workers entering the country's labor force over the next decade.⁴ **With the highest labor force participation rate of any racial or ethnic group (67%),⁵ Latinos play a central role in powering economic growth and the nation's future prosperity.**

Working-class Latinos are essential both to the U.S. economy and to American businesses. Businesses across the country depend on Latino workers to operate, grow and compete. Workers create value every day for business through their labor, skills and experience, just as owners and investors create value through their strategic direction and capital.

Despite their contributions, working-class Latinos remain concentrated in jobs that offer low pay, limited benefits, unpredictable hours and elevated risk of injury. These conditions shape how they experience the economy and help explain why they rank jobs and the cost of living as top concerns. In a 2025 UnidosUS bipartisan poll, Latino voters across income levels identified jobs and rising costs as their most pressing economic issues.⁶ For working-class Latinos, these concerns are especially acute, reflecting wages that lag behind expenses, limited access to health insurance and paid leave, and employment insecurity driven by unstable work.

This brief examines where Latino working-class adults work, the kinds of jobs they do and the conditions they experience on the job.⁷ We focus on employment, wages, benefits, schedules and safety to inform policymakers about the reality of millions of Latino workers who rely on wages to survive.

¹ In alignment with U.S. Census Bureau conventions, we use the terms "Hispanic" and "Latino" interchangeably 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.

² In this series of briefs, working class is defined as those ages 18 to 24 with a family income of less than 300% of the poverty line or ages 25 and older who either 1.) have less than a bachelor's degree or 2.) have a bachelor's degree but still have family income less than 300% of the poverty line. See the first brief in this series, "Latino Working Class: America's Economic Engine." Where family income is not available, such as in the Federal Reserve Board, Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking, the midpoint of a seven-category household income variable is assigned as a proxy to compute the poverty ratio.

³ Santiago Sueiro, Mark Mather and Sara Srygley. "Latino Working Class: America's Economic Engine," December 2025. https://unidosus.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/latinoworkingclass_onepager_unidosus.pdf

⁴ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Trends of Hispanics in the U.S. Labor Force," October 2024. [https://www.bls.gov/blog/2024/employment-trends-of-hispanics-in-the-us-labor-force.htm#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20Hispanics%20comprised%2019,Hispanic%20workforce%20\(6%20percent\)](https://www.bls.gov/blog/2024/employment-trends-of-hispanics-in-the-us-labor-force.htm#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20Hispanics%20comprised%2019,Hispanic%20workforce%20(6%20percent)).

⁵ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "The Employment Situation: September 2025," November 2025. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/empsit.pdf>

⁶ UnidosUS. "Latino Voters Sound Alarm over Lack of Congressional Oversight; GOP Largely Blamed for Government Shutdown." November 3, 2025. <https://unidosus.org/press-releases/latino-voters-sound-alarm-over-lack-of-congressional-oversight-gop-largely-blamed-for-government-shutdown/>.

⁷ Data in this brief are based on PRB's analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau's Current Population Survey (Annual Social and Economic Supplement), unless noted otherwise.

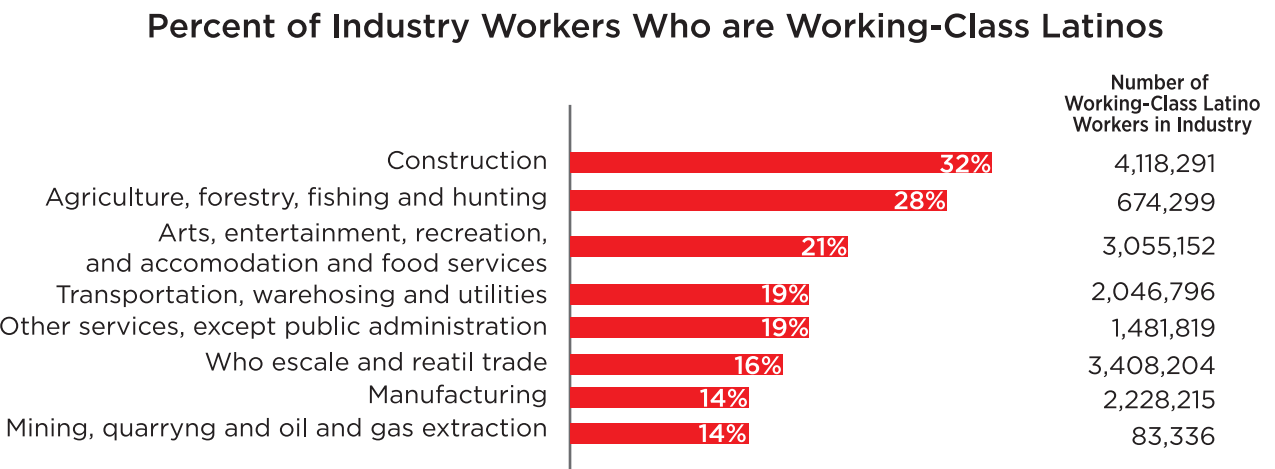
Our hope is that this results in new investments in Latino working-class people. It is essential to understand the poor quality of jobs in the industries in which working-class Latinos are concentrated so that steps can be taken to improve economic stability for Latino working families and the businesses and communities that depend on their labor. Ultimately, we aim to shed light on the contributions of these workers, highlight the importance of investing in their well-being, and ensure that work provides not just a paycheck, but dignity and an opportunity to live a full life.

Latino Workers Are the Backbone of Our Economy, Powering Essential Industries

Latino working-class workers are concentrated in industries that form the foundation of the U.S. economy, including those that provide essential goods and services. Industries like construction, agriculture, manufacturing, food services and transportation rely on working-class Latinos to power their workforce (see Figure 1).

They represent **32% of all construction workers, 28% of all agriculture workers, 19% of transportation workers** (such as truck drivers), and **14% of manufacturing workers**, producing cars, construction materials and other essential goods. Latinos also make up a high share of America's tipped workforce, particularly in restaurants and bars. Nationally, **26% of the 2.3 million adults** working as servers and bartenders are Latino.⁸ Compared to nontipped workers, tipped workers earn low wages, experience wide income swings, and lack basic workplace benefits and protections.⁹ Jobs in many of these industries are physically demanding, carry higher risks of injury, and offer low pay, limited benefits or unpredictable hours. As a result, they're more likely to experience persistent labor shortages and high turnover.¹⁰

Figure 1. Industries in the U.S. With the Highest Share of Workers Who are Working-Class, 2025



Source: PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2025 Current Population Survey.
 Note: Working-class status relies in part on the poverty ratio of family income for 2024.

⁸ Irene Tung, Teofilo Reyes, and Restaurant Opportunities Center United, "Wait Staff and Bartenders Depend on Tips for More Than Half of Their Earnings," <https://www.nelp.org/insights-research/wait-staff-and-bartenders-depend-on-tips-for-more-than-half-of-their-earnings/>.

⁹ Nina Mast, "Tipping Is a Racist Relic and a Modern Tool of Economic Oppression in the South" (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, June 18, 2024), <https://files.epi.org/uploads/283447.pdf>.

¹⁰ U.S. Chamber of Commerce, "Understanding America's Labor Shortage: The Most Impacted Industries," October 2025. <https://www.uschamber.com/workforce/understanding-americas-labor-shortage-the-most-impacted-industries>.

High Employment Rates, Low Wages: The Latino Working-Class Reality

Working-class Latinos are more likely to be in the workforce than any other racial or ethnic working-class group, and they work similar hours to other groups: **Latino working-class adults have the highest employment rate of any racial or ethnic working-class group at 63%** (see Figure 2). This reflects both strong attachments to work and the relatively young age of the Latino working class.

Working-class Latinos also participate in the labor force, meaning they are employed or actively seeking employment at higher rates than other working-class adults. The one-third of working-class Latinos who are not in the labor force include students, individuals who have stopped actively looking for work, and retirees. Among working-class Latino adults who are not in the labor force, 35% are age 65 or older, compared with 52% nationally.

Figure 2: Employment Status of the U.S. Working Class, by Race/Ethnicity, 2025



*Non-Hispanic

Source: PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2025 Current Population Survey.

Note: Working-class status relies in part on the poverty ratio of family income for 2024. Unemployment rate is the share of those who are in the labor force but are unemployed and looking for work.

Employed working-class Latinos work similar hours to other working-class adults. About 68% work between 35 and 40 hours per week, while 14% work more than 40 hours and 18% work fewer than 35 hours. This distribution closely mirrors work patterns across the working class nationally, underscoring that Latino workers are not working fewer hours but are earning less or receiving fewer benefits for similar levels of work.

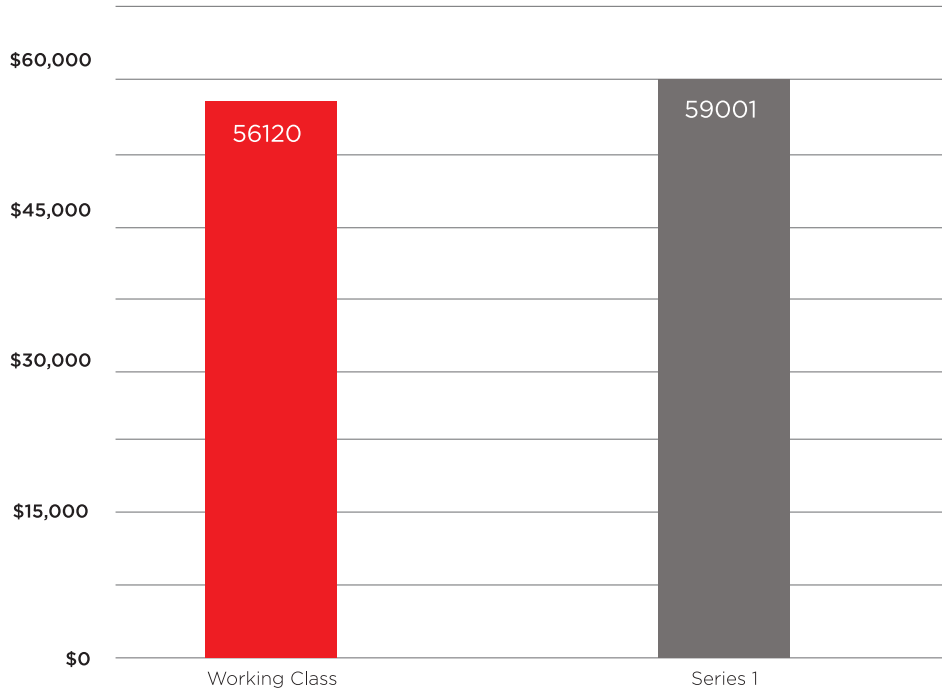
Despite high workforce participation overall, about 6% of the Latino working class is unemployed and actively seeking work. This unemployment rate is lower than that of the Black working class (7%) but higher than that of the white working class (4%).

Together, these patterns highlight a strong attachment to work along with unequal economic returns. Working-class Latinos are more likely to be working than other groups and are deeply embedded in the labor market — yet remain exposed to job insecurity and limited economic mobility.

Wages That Don't Stretch Far Enough

Even with strong participation in the labor market, many working-class Latinos do not earn enough to guarantee financial security. In 2025, the median income for Latino working-class families was \$56,000, compared to \$59,000 for non-Latino working class families (see Figure 3).

Figure 3. Median Family Income for U.S. Working-Class Adults by Ethnicity, 2025



Note: Working-class status relies in part on the poverty ratio of family income for 2024.
Source: PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2025 Current Population Survey.

Only about one-third of working-class Latinos live in families earning \$100,000 or more annually. Even in these families, economic strain is common, as many households rely on multiple earners, larger households or long work hours to reach that income level — and struggle to cover high housing, child care and transportation costs.

Income instability further compounds these challenges. **More than 1 in 5 working-class Latinos (21%) report working more than one job**, reflecting a need to piece together income from multiple sources. Work schedules are also unpredictable for many. While 69% of working-class Latinos report working regular hours, a substantial share face ongoing volatility in employment. Further, 20% say their schedules vary based primarily on employer needs, limiting their ability to plan child care, education or second jobs.¹¹

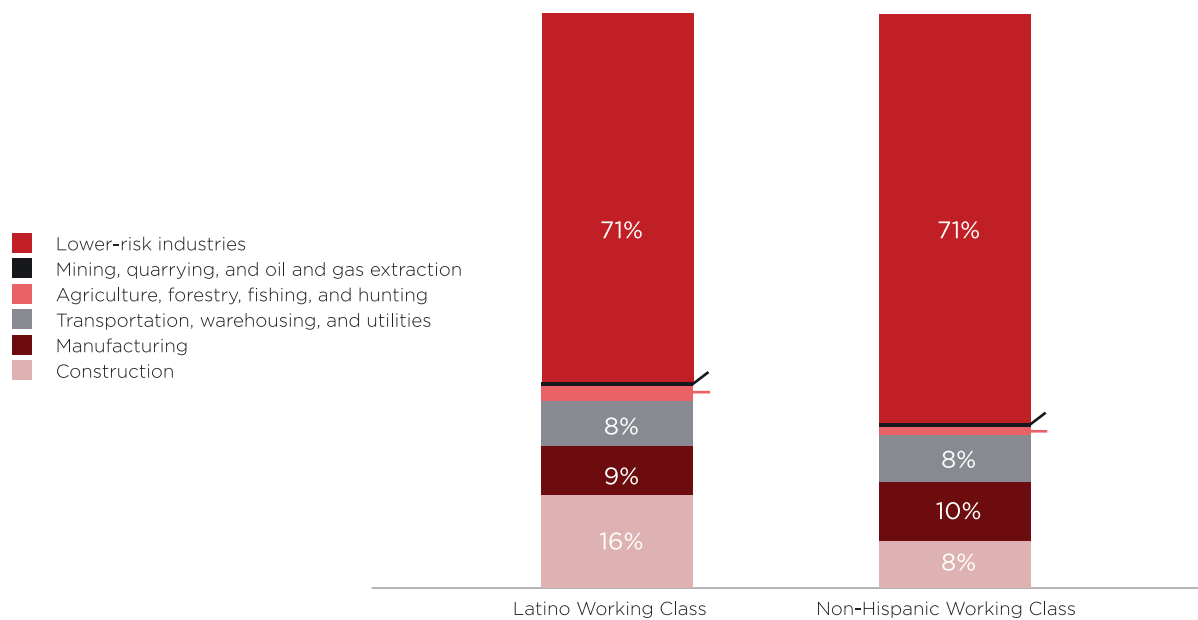
Working-class Latinos also rely on nontraditional work arrangements. About 5% report working as sole proprietors or independent contractors, including landscapers, housekeepers, street vendors, food truck operators, hairdressers, plumbers, roofers and other skilled tradespeople. While these workers provide essential services in their communities, they sometimes operate unincorporated businesses. This status exposes them to personal financial risk and can deny them access to benefits and job protections.

¹¹ PRB analysis of Federal Reserve Board, Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking, 2024.

Injured at Work: Working-Class Latinos Face Greater Risks and Experience Less Workplace Safety

Working-class Latinos disproportionately work in industries where injuries and fatalities are common; nearly 35% hold jobs in high-risk sectors such as construction, agriculture, utilities and transportation (see Figure 4). Such work relies heavily on physical labor and exposes workers to dangerous conditions, heavy machinery and environmental hazards. As a result, Latino workers experience some of the highest risks on the job. **In 2022, Latino workers saw the highest workplace fatality rate among racial/ethnic groups:** 4.6 deaths per 100,000 workers, compared with 4.2 for Black workers, 3.5 for white workers, and 1.7 for Asian American workers.¹²

Figure 4. Working-Class Adults in High-Risk Industry Jobs in the United States, by Ethnicity, 2025
Percent of Employed Working-Class Adults Who Are Employed in Industry



Note: Fewer than 0.5% of adults in both groups worked in mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction industries. Working class status relies in part on the poverty ratio of family income for 2024.

Source: PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, 2025 Current Population Survey.

Nonfatal injuries follow a similar pattern, with industries that employ large shares of working-class Latinos also reporting the highest injury rates. Transportation and warehousing, where 19% of workers are Latino working-class adults, recorded the highest rate of nonfatal workplace injuries in 2023, with 4.3 injuries per 100 full-time workers. The agriculture sector, where 29% of workers are working-class Latinos, reported the next-highest rate, at 4 injuries per 100 workers.¹³

In addition, Latino workers are injured at higher rates than other workers, even in a similar job. For example, a study of California workers' compensation claims found that Latino workers face higher injury risks than white workers in nearly three-quarters (73%) of the occupations studied, pointing to differences in job assignments, safety practices, and training and enforcement rather than occupation alone.¹⁴

¹² Algernon Austin, Center for Economic and Policy Research, "Latino Immigrants do Many of the Most Dangerous Jobs," October 2024. <https://cepr.net/publications/latino-immigrants-do-many-of-the-most-dangerous-jobs/>

¹³ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Number and Rate of Nonfatal Work Injuries in Detailed Private Industries," 2023. <https://www.bls.gov/charts/injuries-and-illnesses/number-and-rate-of-nonfatal-work-injuries-by-industry-subsector.htm>

¹⁴ Dworsky M, Boden LJ, Chase EC, et al. Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Occupational Health. JAMA Health Forum. 2025;6(9):e253495. doi:10.1001/jamahealthforum.2025.3495.

Immigrant workers are especially vulnerable. **While foreign-born Latinos made up about 9% of the U.S. workforce in 2022, they accounted for 14% of workplace fatalities**, reflecting the high concentration of immigrant workers in dangerous jobs.¹⁵

Many working-class Latinos also experience wage violations. Industries that employ large numbers of working-class Latinos — such as construction, agriculture, transportation and warehousing, and food services — are considered “low-wage, high-violation” industries by the U.S. Department of Labor, meaning they have high rates of reported wage and compensation violations. Workers in these sectors frequently report unpaid overtime, minimum-wage violations and other forms of wage theft, further undermining economic security.¹⁶ These violations add up to billions of dollars in lost wages.¹⁷

Missing the Benefits Others Count On: Health Insurance, Retirement and Paid Sick Leave

While wages are an important aspect of job quality, employer-provided benefits such as health insurance, paid family and medical leave, and retirement contributions make up a significant share of total compensation and play a central role in creating economic stability for working-class families.¹⁸ These benefits reduce financial risk in times of illness or caregiving responsibility, lower out-of-pocket health costs, and support long-term security by helping workers plan for the future.^{19 20}

Access to workplace benefits depends largely on employer decisions and industry norms rather than worker need.²¹ **Working-class Latinos face significant gaps in health care coverage; only 35% receive employer-provided health insurance.** Even among those who do have coverage, 11% receive no employer contribution toward their premiums, increasing financial strain on already-tight household budgets.²²

Latino workers also lack adequate access to paid family and medical leave and retirement benefits. Just 58% of working-class Latinos report having paid sick leave, limiting their ability to recover from illness or care for family members without losing income. **Only 26% have access to a pension or retirement plan, leaving many without a pathway to long-term financial security after decades of employment.**

These serious gaps in benefits compound the challenges working-class Latinos face in industries characterized by low wages, unstable schedules and high injury risk. When jobs fail to provide benefits, workers absorb the costs through missed paychecks, delayed medical care and financial insecurity, undermining both family stability and workforce resilience.

¹⁵ Algernon Austin, Center for Economic and Policy Research, “Latino Immigrants do Many of the Most Dangerous Jobs,” October 2024. <https://cepr.net/publications/latino-immigrants-do-many-of-the-most-dangerous-jobs/>.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Labor, Wages and Hours Division, “Low Wage, High Violation Industries,” 2024. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/data/charts/low-wage-high-violation-industries>.

¹⁷ <https://www.epi.org/publication/employers-steal-billions-from-workers-paychecks-each-year/>

¹⁸ “Parental Employment Quality during Childhood and Mental Health in Adolescence: Longitudinal Evidence.” JAMA Health Forum. 2024. <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jama-health-forum/fullarticle/2839235>.

¹⁹ Kaiser Family Foundation. “2024 Employer Health Benefits Survey.” 2024. <https://www.kff.org/health-costs/2024-employer-health-benefits-survey/#3f3fc2dd-74dd-4cb6-9d1c-9c19ff972f6a>

²⁰ ScienceDirect. “Handbook of Labor Economics: Chapter 5 - Non-wage amenities” ScienceDirect. Accessed 2025. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1573446325000021>.

²¹ Goodman, J. M., Richardson, D. M., & Dow, W. H. (2022). Racial and ethnic inequities in paid family and medical leave: United States, 2011 and 2017–2018. American Journal of Public Health, 112(7), 1050–1058. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2022.306825>.

²² PRB analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey, 2025, and the Centers for Disease Control, National Health Interview Survey, 2024.

Union Jobs Provide a Path to Better Pay

Union membership remains one of the most effective ways to improve job quality in many industries. Union jobs typically offer higher wages, safer workplaces, more predictable schedules and better benefits than nonunion jobs. **For example, research shows Latino workers who are members of unions are paid more and have better access to employer-provided benefits than their nonunion counterparts.**^{23 24} Latino workers also see larger wage gains from union membership than white workers.²⁵

Despite these benefits, access to union jobs remains limited. Only 10% of working-class Latinos are union members. Low unionization rates are another factor that contribute to low job quality in the industries in which Latino working-class adults are concentrated.

Investing in Job Quality Is Good for Both Workers and Businesses

Creating an economy that works for the Latino working class requires a broader vision of job quality that recognizes work as central to people's lives as well as an essential tool to improve economic outcomes. A good job should provide enough pay and stability to meet basic needs, predictable hours to support family life, and protections that keep workers safe and healthy. When every job meets that standard, workers, businesses and the economy stand to benefit a great deal.

Latino working-class adults play an indispensable role in the U.S. economy and are the future of the workforce. Yet they struggle with low wages, limited access to benefits and overall lower job quality. This lack of investment in good quality jobs has colored the way that Latino working-class people view the economy. It should be no surprise to policymakers that Latino working-class voters consistently ranked jobs as one of their top concerns over the past several years.²⁶

Policymakers should and can earn greater confidence from the Latino working class by adopting policies that improve pay, benefits and safety across the board. **For example, policies such as raising the minimum wage, establishing a national paid family and medical leave program, and supporting safety and antidiscrimination enforcement are extremely popular (82% of Latino voters support raising the minimum wage to at least \$17 an hour).**²⁷

Latino workers will only become more important both to the economy and as a stronger political bloc moving forward. They are one of the youngest and fastest-growing segments of the U.S. working class,²⁸ and they make up nearly 80% of new workers entering the country's labor force over the next decade.²⁹

Major industries can similarly earn the loyalty and trust of the Latino working class while bettering business outcomes if they improve job quality. **Recent evidence shows that more businesses are effectively implementing a "good job strategy," actively investing in the elements that make jobs high quality.**

²³ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Labor Unions and the U.S. Economy," August 2023. <https://home.treasury.gov/news/featured-stories/labor-unions-and-the-us-economy#ftn5>

²⁴ U.S. Department of the Treasury, "Labor Unions and the Middle Class," August 2023. <https://home.treasury.gov/system/files/136/Labor-Unions-And-The-Middle-Class.pdf>

²⁵ Josh Bivens, et al. "Unions Promote Racial Equity," July 2023. <https://files.epi.org/uploads/270662.pdf>

²⁶ UnidosUS, "Latino Voters Sound Alarm over Lack of Congressional Oversight; GOP Largely Blamed for Government Shutdown," November 3, 2025. <https://unidosus.org/press-releases/latino-voters-sound-alarm-over-lack-of-congressional-oversight-gop-largely-blamed-for-government-shutdown/>.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ In this series of briefs, working class is defined as those ages 18 to 24 with a family income of less than 300% of the poverty line or ages 25 and older who either 1.) have less than a bachelor's degree or 2.) have a bachelor's degree but still have family income less than 300% of the poverty line. See the first brief in this series, "Latino Working Class: America's Economic Engine." Where family income is not available, such as in the Federal Reserve Board, Survey of Household Economics and Decisionmaking, the midpoint of a seven-category household income variable is assigned as a proxy to compute the poverty ratio.

²⁹ U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Employment Trends of Hispanics in the U.S. Labor Force," October 2024. [https://www.bls.gov/blog/2024/employment-trends-of-hispanics-in-the-us-labor-force.htm#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20Hispanics%20comprised%2019,Hispanic%20workforce%20\(6%20percent\).and%2017-2018.American%20Journal%20of%20Public%20Health,112\(7\),1050-1058.](https://www.bls.gov/blog/2024/employment-trends-of-hispanics-in-the-us-labor-force.htm#:~:text=In%202023%2C%20Hispanics%20comprised%2019,Hispanic%20workforce%20(6%20percent).and%2017-2018.American%20Journal%20of%20Public%20Health,112(7),1050-1058.)

For example, one study of major retailers found that providing higher wages and increased benefits boosts both productivity and profitability. Costco is an instructive case. After raising their average wage to \$26 an hour and investing more in worker benefits and trainings, the major retailer reduced their turnover rate to 8% (compared to an industry average of 60%), significantly increased worker productivity, and saved millions of dollars while boosting their stock price (which outperforms both the retail sector and the S&P 500).³⁰ **Employers cannot thrive without workers who feel secure, valued and productive. Investing in workers engenders loyalty that allows workers to also invest in their employers.**

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³⁰ Cindy Perman, "Costco and Other Retailers Prove a 'Good Jobs' Strategy Works," December 2024. <https://www.hbs.edu/bigs/costco-and-other-retailers-prove-a-good-jobs-strategy-works>



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