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Breaking Barriers, Building Prosperity: A Workforce Framework for Latino Workers

Across the country, working people are asking a simple question: Why does it feel so hard to get ahead, even when you're doing everything right?

For Latino workers, that question reflects their daily reality. They are powering the economy, yet their jobs do not provide the stability or dignity that should come with work. Rising costs, combined with jobs that offer low wages and limited benefits, have made it harder for many to build a good life. It is no surprise that [Latino voters consistently identify jobs](#), wages and the cost of living as their top concerns.

Latino workers are a critical component of the strength and future of the U.S. economy. Latinos [make up nearly 20% of the workforce](#), have the [highest labor force participation rate](#) of any group, and are projected to make up [80% of new workers in the next 10 years](#). They are essential to keeping the economy running and growing. Yet they are [disproportionately concentrated in jobs that pay low wages](#); offer limited access to benefits like health insurance, paid leave and retirement; and expose workers to higher risks on the job. Even with high levels of workforce participation, many Latino workers face unstable schedules, income volatility and barriers to long-term economic security.

This reality is felt across the U.S. workforce. For many, a job is no longer enough to guarantee a decent standard of living. Work should provide not just a paycheck, but the foundation for a stable life: the ability to afford a home, care for family, plan for the future and participate fully in society.

A Broader Vision for Work and Opportunity

At UnidosUS, we believe that every worker deserves a good job: one that pays enough for families to thrive, provides essential benefits, offers stability and safety, and treats workers with dignity and respect. It also ensures that workers have a voice in the decisions that shape their working conditions and economic futures.

Latino workers frequently enter the workforce early, and too often, that's where their trajectory stalls. The jobs they fill are essential; they sustain families, anchor communities and keep economies running. But essential work should not mean dead-end work. Strengthening access to education and career pathways must advance in tandem with raising the quality, compensation and mobility of the jobs that already exist.

Building an economy that works for Latino workers — and for all working people — requires a dual approach:

- **Raise the floor** by ensuring that every job meets basic standards of pay, benefits, safety and dignity.
- **Expand opportunity** by creating clear access points and pathways for workers to advance, build skills and pursue economic mobility if they choose.

Together, these strategies recognize both the value of work today and the importance of opportunity for tomorrow.

Work, Immigration and the Economy

Latino workers, including millions of immigrant workers, are a core aspect of our economic prosperity. They contribute to key industries, strengthen local economies and support business growth across the country.

However, gaps in labor protections and immigration policies leave many workers vulnerable to exploitation and retaliation and limit their ability to fully participate in the economy. When workers cannot safely report abuses, access benefits or move freely in the labor market, it lowers standards not just for them, but for entire industries.

Improving labor conditions for Latino and immigrant workers is therefore not only a matter of fairness, it is an economic imperative. Strong labor standards create a level playing field for businesses, reduce turnover, improve productivity and increase consumer demand. When workers are paid fairly and have access to benefits, businesses perform better and local economies grow stronger.

A Framework for Action

This Labor and Workforce Policy Framework builds on the lived experiences of Latino workers, insights from UnidosUS Affiliates and extensive research on the Latino working class. It reflects a simple but powerful idea: When work provides dignity, stability and opportunity, workers, businesses and the economy all benefit.

To achieve this vision, UnidosUS advances an approach grounded in three interconnected pillars:

1. Training for Good Jobs and Careers
2. Worker Protections
3. Fair Wages, Benefits and Worker Voice

Pillar 1: Training for Good Jobs and Careers

Latinos represent a vital segment of the U.S. labor force. However, systemic factors disproportionately funnel Latinos into low-wage, low-quality jobs despite their contributions across sectors from construction to healthcare and education. For instance, Latino men are disproportionately represented in natural resources, construction and maintenance occupations, while Latinas are overrepresented in service roles. Furthermore, Latinas earn only 58 cents for every dollar earned by white, non-Hispanic men, and both Latino men and women remain significantly underrepresented in high-paying jobs.

The current workforce system faces a crisis due, in part, to decades of federal disinvestment. The complicated structure of [federal funding for workforce training](#), along with the historically low level of [federal spending on workforce training](#), limits the workforce system's ability to develop strategies that benefit Latino workers. As a result of this disinvestment, quality workforce strategies struggle to reach scale and adopt innovative practices.

Entrenched hiring practices, unequal access to networks, and limited federal and employer investment in training and infrastructure curtail access to well-paying and high growth occupations. These barriers limit economic mobility and suppress broader economic growth by failing to fully leverage the talents of Latino workers. Interventions that address these issues through industrywide efforts, public/private partnerships and supportive services are essential to dismantling these systemic barriers and ensuring access to good quality jobs.

Solutions

- **Fully Funded Workforce Training:** Restore and entrench “COVID-19-era funding” for the federal workforce system. This investment would allow programs to reach scale, implement innovative education practices, and create pathways to good quality jobs for millions of Latino workers.
- **Registered Apprenticeships (RAPs):** Expand RAPs and preapprenticeship pathways where Latinos are underrepresented, embedding culturally competent mentoring, employer supports, and include childcare, transportation and English language learning (ELL) services.
- **Community-Based Training Models:** Connect Latino workers directly with employer-defined skill needs, particularly in sectors marked by occupational segregation. These models improve access to support services and leverage flexibility within government funded programs.
- **Sector-Based Partnerships:** Build employer-led collaborations in high-growth industries alongside higher education institutions, organized labor, Community-Based Organizations, and training providers to develop affordable certification and career pathways.
- **Skills-First Hiring:** Incentivize employers to eliminate inflated degree requirements and adopt competency-based hiring for quality jobs.
- **Comprehensive Ecosystem Supports:** Integrate workforce development with affordable housing, childcare and similar wraparound supports to meet workers' basic needs.

Pillar 2: Worker Protections

Latino workers are overrepresented in low-wage and high-risk industries such as construction, agriculture and manufacturing, where unsafe conditions and weak enforcement put them at greater risk. In 2023, Latino workers accounted for [24% of workplace fatalities](#) despite representing only 19% of the workforce. Wage theft — including unpaid overtime, withheld wages and misclassification — affects an estimated [15% of low-wage Latino workers](#) each year, costing workers billions of earned income.

Many workers fear speaking up about unsafe conditions or workplace violations. Fear of retaliation, language barriers and gaps in labor protections, particularly for immigrant workers, allow unsafe practices to persist and drive down standards across industries. Strengthening worker protections will ensure that workers are safe and that responsible employers can compete on a level playing field.

Solutions

- **Inclusive Labor Standards:** Extend labor protections to all workers, regardless of immigration status or employment classification, including gig, agricultural and domestic workers.
- **Strengthened Antidiscrimination and Worker Protections:** Develop policies that address language barriers, immigration- and race-related harassment, and lack of access to worker rights information.
- **Enhanced Enforcement:** Increase enforcement capacity, strengthen employer penalties for violations, and implement further measures to protect workers from retaliation when reporting workplace violations.

Pillar 3: Fair Wages, Benefits and Worker Voice

Latino workers earn unequal pay and lack access to workplace benefits. Latino workers earn a median income of [\\$65,500 compared to \\$89,000](#) for non-Hispanic white workers, and Latinas face even wider pay gaps, earning just [58 cents for every dollar](#) earned by white, non-Hispanic men. [Many Latino workers lack access](#) to essential benefits such as healthcare, paid leave and retirement savings.

Ensuring fair wages and benefits requires not only setting strong standards, but also empowering workers to shape the conditions of their work. [Only 8.5% of Latino workers are unionized](#), and many face barriers to advocating for better pay, benefits and working conditions. When workers have a voice, they are better able to secure higher wages, safer workplaces and more stable jobs.

Solutions

- **Established Livable Wage Floors:** Set minimum wage standards that reflect the real cost of living to [ensure that full-time work provides a pathway to economic stability](#).
- **Expanded Access to Benefits:** Ensure all workers, across employment types, have access to healthcare, paid family and medical leave, and retirement security.
- **Strengthen Worker Voice and Representation:**
 - Support collective bargaining and worker organizing to improve wages, benefits and working conditions.
 - Promote workplace structures that give workers a meaningful role in decision-making, including worker councils and other participatory models.

Conclusion

The strength of the U.S. economy depends on the strength of its workforce, and Latino workers are central to that future. Latino workers are critical to the nation's continued growth and competitiveness, working in essential industries and growing at a rapid pace. Building an economy that works for Latino workers — and all working people — requires both expanding access to education and training as well as improving job quality for everyone. It's why labor and workforce development is one of four key pillars in the [UnidosUS Economic Prosperity Agenda](#), because every job should provide fair pay, essential benefits, safety and dignity, while also creating pathways for those who seek to advance.

This framework outlines an approach to achieving that vision. Its pillars are interconnected and mutually reinforcing. Progress in one area cannot be sustained without progress in the others. Policymakers, employers, labor organizations and community leaders all have a role to play in shaping an economy that reflects the contributions and aspirations of working families. Solutions must be informed by the lived experiences of workers and grounded in accountability and long-term impact.

The Latino workforce is not a liability but rather an asset to be valued and invested in. When Latino workers have access to good jobs and opportunity, businesses grow, communities thrive and the entire economy is stronger. UnidosUS and its Affiliates stand ready to partner with all stakeholders to advance this vision and ensure that the workers who power the nation's economy can fully share in its prosperity.

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