

ISSUE BRIEF

African American Workers: Joining Unions to Get an Equal Share

Unions help raise workers' pay and narrow the income gap that disadvantages African Americans. Union membership can be particularly important for workers who are subject to continuing discrimination, because collective bargaining emphasizes equal pay and fair treatment in the workplace.

A gap persists between African American workers and white workers in the U.S. workforce. African Americans continue to be economically and socially disadvantaged.

- **Pay:** African American men in 2001 made 75 percent of the earnings of their white counterparts. African American women made 90 percent of the earnings of their white counterparts.
- **Poverty:** In 2001, the black poverty rate (22.1 percent) is more than twice as high as that of whites (7.8 percent).
- **Unemployment:** In 2001, the unemployment rate among African Americans was 10.3 percent, more than twice as high as that of whites (5.1 percent).
- **Impact of manufacturing decline:** The decline in manufacturing jobs has hit African American workers particularly hard.

In 1982, a quarter of African Americans worked in the nation's factories—that percentage declined to 13 percent in 2001. Many African American workers ended up in the growing number of low-paying service jobs, not in the jobs created by the "new economy." For example, African Americans make up only 9 percent of computer systems analysts, whereas 33 percent of nursing aides are black.

- **Discrimination:** Studies show that African American men are three times more likely to be turned down for a job than white men.

Union membership helps close the gap. African American workers make 30 percent more with a union than without one. African American union workers have a median weekly wage of \$603 without a union, they earn a weekly wage of \$463. Union wages help raise living standards for everyone in the community. Unions help African American workers remedy discrimination on the job because a union contract provides means to solve grievances and to seek equal treatment.

African American workers want unions. African Americans are more likely to be members of unions. About 17 percent of black workers are in unions, compared with 13.5 percent of all workers. But even more African Americans say they would join a union if given the chance. According to a national survey conducted by Peter D. Hart Research Associates in 2001, African Americans 35 and older are among the strongest supporters of the right to choose a union, backing the right to collective bargaining by 93 percent, with all African Americans at 85 percent.

Sources: U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings*, January 2002; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999; U.S. Census, 2000; Peter D. Hart Research Associates, polling for the AFL-CIO, 2001.