

ISSUE BRIEF

Latino Workers: Improving Their Families' Futures Through Unions

Because collective bargaining emphasizes equal pay and fair treatment in the workplace, union membership can be particularly important for Latino workers, especially immigrants. Struggling to get by and often altogether left out of the economy, Latino workers are turning to unions to have a fighting chance in American society.

There is a deep economic divide between Latino workers and the rest of the labor force in the United States.

- **Income:** The median Latino family income of \$35,054 was 69 percent of the median U.S. family income of \$50,890 in 2000.
- **Poverty:** The poverty rate for Latinos (21.4 percent) was almost three times higher than for whites in 2001 (7.8 percent).
- **Unemployment:** The unemployment rate for Latinos (7.6 percent) was much higher than the rate for whites (5.9 percent) in mid-2002.
- **Inequality in earnings:** The earnings ratio of Latinos to whites has plummeted since the early 1970s. In 1974, Latino women made 84 percent of what white women made—that number dropped to 74 percent by 2001. In 1974, Latino men made 72 percent of what white men made—by 2000, they made only 63 percent.
- **Largely service workers:** One in five Latino employees worked in service occupations in 2000, and better than one in 10 was a farm worker. Latinos were half as likely as whites to work as managers.
- **Education:** Only 49 percent of Latinos ages 25 and older graduated from high school in 2000.
- **Discrimination:** Studies show Latino men are three times more likely to be turned down for a job than are white men.

Unions make a difference for Latino workers. Latino union members' wages are 45 percent higher than those of Latino workers without a union. Latino union members earn a median wage of \$578 per week, while nonunion Latino workers earn just \$398 per week. Higher union wages help Latino workers remedy discrimination on the job and raise the living standards for everyone in the community.

Union members are also much more likely to have employer-provided health care and defined-benefit pensions. Unions help end unfair treatment and remedy discrimination because union contracts make sure management treats everyone fairly. That is why as Latino workers have become an important driving force of the U.S. economy, they have also been entering unions in increasing numbers. In 2000, there were 1,554,000 Latino union members, and 11.4 percent of Latino workers belonged to unions. That is an increase of 83,000 Latino union members in 1998.

Sources: U.S. Department of Labor, *Employment and Earnings*, January 2002; Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Employee Benefits in Private Industry*, 1999; U.S. Census, 2000.