

ISSUE BRIEF

Working Women Seek Fairness in the Workplace

More than at any time in recent history, working women are joining together in unions. In the United States, 99 out of 100 women will work for pay at some point in their lives. Yet working women, on average, are paid 73 cents for every \$1 earned by men and are only half as likely to have pensions. They are much more likely to hold minimum wage, part-time or temporary jobs. By joining together in unions, working women help close the gaps created by discrimination, balance demands of work and family and have a way to be heard on the job. With union contracts, women earn 30 percent more than those without a union, and union women are much more likely to have good health care, pensions and other benefits.

The number of working women union members is rising. Approximately 6.8 million working women are union members today—and their numbers are growing. Overall, 11.5 percent of working women are union members, compared with 15.2 percent of male workers. While the number of women union members rose from 5.9 million in 1983 to 6.8 million in 2001 (a 15 percent increase), women are still underrepresented in unions. Women make up 42 percent of union membership, but they account for 48 percent of the total workforce.

Working women want to join unions. In spite of the growth in union membership among women, opinion polling shows millions more women would join a union if they could. Fifty-one percent of working women who do not already have a union say they would vote for one tomorrow if given the chance, according to a survey by Peter D. Hart Research Associates. The survey also showed that nearly 70 percent of women said that they don't trust employers to treat employees fairly or trust them only a little.

Women are more likely to try to form unions—and win their union elections at a higher rate. Fifty-five percent of the workers who won a union election in 1998 and 1999 in the private sector were women, according to Cornell researcher Kate Bronfenbrenner. Women of color are especially open to forming unions. In union elections where women of color made up three-quarters of the workforce, workers won 83 percent of the time. These data do not include instances where workers formed a union outside the National Labor Relations Board—such as through card-check or public sector elections.

Union membership means better pay, benefits and equality for women. Women who are union members have a median weekly wage of \$643; without a union, they earn a weekly wage of \$494. With union contracts, women earn 33 percent more than their nonunion counterparts. This is why unions play a vital role in the lives of women in our country.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, various years; Bureau of Labor Statistics, data from various years and *Employee Benefits in Private Industry*, 1999; Peter D. Hart Research Associates, polling for the AFL-CIO, various years.