



Roxanne Brown

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“This is the new face of labor.”

An unexpected advocate for the rights of Steelworkers and all working people

Roxanne Brown is one of four lobbyists in the Legislative Office of the United Steelworkers, where she works to strengthen the rights of workers in industries ranging from education to construction. She focuses on a range of policy and regulatory issues—including defense, the environment and energy—for the international union’s 1.2 million members. Brown advocates on critical legislative and regulatory matters encompassing the domestic pulp and paper, nuclear, shipbuilding, aluminum, cement, and specialty metals industries.

Brown’s work as an advocate and lobbyist is her way of showing her love for fellow union members. In them, she sees her mother and aunts who emigrated from Jamaica and built good lives for themselves and their families with hard work and union jobs. Her pride in representing the interests of her members is matched by the joy she feels when women in the union tell her how glad they are to see her in her role. The time she spends in the field convinces her that more diverse leadership in the labor movement will help accelerate the economic and educational empowerment of all workers.

As a union, we're advocating for the bread-and-butter issues of working people in the United States. It's about wages and retirement security. And as our nation is transitioning to a clean energy economy, much of the work that we're trying to do is to help design good, sensible and reasonable clean energy policies that take my members into account on the industrial side, and in the building and construction trades. We want to ensure that all of us play a role in this new, emerging economy.

How did I get into this line of work? It was a complete fluke. I grew up around unions, but didn't know what they were. I'm from Jamaica. My family settled in New York. The women in my family worked in healthcare and food services. An aunt who worked for the county hospital was a member of the Civil Service Employee Association (CSEA). She would take me to union picnics and union parties, but I had no idea what CSEA was. I just thought it was the hospital party. That was my very first experience with unions.

“ *This is the new face of labor. We're young, we're women, we're immigrants.* ”

One of the biggest battles that labor is facing right now is over wages. Women are making only 77 or 78 cents for every dollar that a man makes. For a black woman, it's only 64 cents for every dollar that a white man makes. And for Hispanic women, it's only 56 cents. The labor movement is trying to attain parity. That's the same goal as the women's movement. We have to create that equality across the board. Every wage gap that exists is money that's leaving the pockets of women all over the country. I grew up in a single-family household. My mom was a single mom. Every penny counts when you're a single mom. The labor movement understands that. This is why wage equality has been one of its biggest fights.

I started with the Steelworkers when I was 19 years old. I was attending Howard University and couldn't afford to pay for school anymore and had to leave school. My boyfriend, who later became my husband, gave me a card to a temp agency.

The agency sent me to the Steelworkers to do data entry. My very first day with the Steelworkers, I met a group of legislative interns who were members. That is when I fell in love with my union, because I fell in love with our members. They were nontraditional and diverse. They were from all walks of life. We're the largest union in the paper sector; the oil sector; chemicals and rubber; and the auto industry. We actually have more people working in the auto industry than the United Auto Workers because our members

make the components for automobiles—steel, aluminum, seats, glass and tires—literally everything.

When I got started, our union was headed by George Becker. He and my bosses all made a very conscious effort to invest in me. It was not something they had to do. But they recognized that I was someone who loved the union and had talent. And they decided that it was important to put resources into me. I think that our past and present leadership really thinks long-term. They think about the next generation of leadership for this union, and I am just one of those pieces.

This is the new face of labor. We're young, we're women, and we're immigrants. That has been educational for some of our members—especially those in industrial sectors, such as paper, in rural communities—who aren't often engaged with people who look like me. As an industrial union, most of our members are middle-aged white men.

It is very helpful for the future and growth of our union for our members to be more comfortable with diversity, particularly as more and more public sector workers are organized and we get more nurses, bus drivers, and cab drivers in the fold. For our union to fully move into the 21st century, it needs to be inclusive. I'm part of us moving in that direction.

When I go out and speak to our members and it's in a place where they would never expect to see someone like me—either because I'm a woman or because I'm black—there's always a sister that comes up to me after I finish. She'll say something like, "I didn't know we had people like you working for the Steelworkers. Oh, my gosh! I'm so happy to see you. You make us proud. Keep doing your thing, girl. You are giving me hope." That alone speaks volumes, and it speaks to what needs to happen more and more. It makes me proud that I can have that effect on someone. That's everything to me.

I want young people, people of color, immigrants, and women to know that unions are about power. They are about economic power. They are about educational power—because those wages allow people to send their kids to school. They are about financial power for the future, because a lot of these union jobs have very strong retirement benefits associated with them.

Looking back at my aunt's path, and the path that my mom was able to take as a registered nurse and a member of the nurses' union, I now understand what it meant for their wages. We lived in a one-bedroom apartment with five of us. Because of their union wages, one person got an apartment. Then someone else got an apartment. And then people started buying houses. That's a lot of power right there.

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I fell in love with our members.* ”