

Why Black Women Need Unions, Why Unions Need Black Women

Foreword by The Honorable Donna F. Edwards,
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Black women in America work. *Hard.* Yet our hard work has too often been exploited and unrecognized, with tremendous consequences for families that rely on the income of black women, who are three times more likely than white women to be single heads of households with children under the age of 18.

And despite the fact that black women lead all women in labor force participation—even while mothers of small children—their hard work does not pay. Black women earn just 64 cents on every dollar earned by white men; and are underrepresented in fields that pay family-supporting wages.

In the public sector, a segment of our economy where black women once fared relatively better, the effects of the Great Recession have been particularly devastating. Prior to the economic downturn, the wage gap between black and

white workers was less in the public sector than in the overall economy. These jobs greatly contributed to building the black middle class. But the disproportionate share of women and African Americans working in state and local governments translated into higher rates of job loss for both groups in these sectors during the recession, according to the Economic Policy Institute.

Perhaps because of these systemic and structural gender- and race-based economic traps, black working women have turned to the power of labor unions to escape poverty and workplace discrimination. In 2014, black women (13.5 percent) were only second to black men (15.8 percent) in having the highest union representation rate compared with other race or gender groups. This reality is not accidental. As reported by the Black Women’s Roundtable in its *Black Women in the United States, 2014: Progress and Challenges* report, black women who work

under collective bargaining agreements earn higher wages and enjoy greater access to benefits than women of all races and ethnicities who are not unionized. In fact, for black women who are low-wage earners, union membership was a greater factor than education in determining increased wages and benefits.

While black women's high union membership rate is little known, an even more important fact has gone virtually unnoticed by the labor movement and the broader progressive community: the success of black women and other women of color as union organizers. In the groundbreaking 2007 article *Race, Gender, and the Rebirth of Trade Unionism*, by Kate Bronfenbrenner and Dorian Warren, extensive research of National Labor Relations Board data on union elections revealed that women of color have the highest election win rates among all demographic groups. Researchers found that "units with a majority white men have the lowest win rates (35 percent) compared to units that are majority women of color (82 percent)." And victory margins are even greater—an astounding 89 percent—when the lead organizer is a woman of color in units with over 75 percent women of color.

Traditionally such expertise, acumen and track records of success are rewarded with agenda-setting leadership opportunities. Yet black women's organizing achievements have not translated into proportionate leadership within the labor and women's movements or in civil rights and economic justice organizations.

The invisibility of black women's labor leadership not only is of consequence to African Americans, but it is significant in light of shifting national population demographics. Other important factors that support the need to build on black women's emerging leadership are the rapid decline of union density and the related rise of income inequality; retirement insecurity; and high poverty rates and other economic indicators. Learning more about how black women lead in the labor movement is one step toward mining and leveraging black women's labor organizing success for the advancement of workers' rights, which is of critical importance to sustaining America's middle-class and working-class families.

In much the same way as the victories of the civil rights movement greatly benefitted white women and other marginalized Americans, the leadership of black women can and should be brought to bear in advancing economic policies of importance to all working families—including paid sick and family leave, pay equity, and living wages.

And Still I Rise is proof that it is time for the story about black women in America to be rewritten. The insights, admonitions, affections, disappointments and aspirations expressed by the 27 black labor women in this report should not be taken lightly. They are critical pieces of a playbook for saving and restoring the labor movement and strengthening African American and working-class families across our nation.