

Union Jobs - A Way Out of Poverty for Blacks and Latinos

The labor movement was the principal force that transformed misery and despair into hope and progress. Out of its bold struggles, economic and social reform gave birth to unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, government relief for the destitute and, above all, new wage levels that meant not mere survival but a tolerable life. - Martin Luther King – October 1965

Between 1978 and 2011, worker pay in the United States rose just 5.7 percent, according to a study by the Economic Policy Institute, despite workers nearly doubling their productivity during the same time period. Union membership in the U.S. fell from 20.1 percent of employed wage and salary workers in 1983 to 11.9 percent in 2010, the lowest rate in more than 70 years. These two statistics – worker pay and union membership - are closely connected. Just last week, the state of Michigan approved legislation that will weaken unions and drive down wages.

Six years ago, the Community Service Society (CSS) released a report on the security guards in New York City ("[Shortchanging Security](#)"). What we found was a workforce that was poorly paid. Few received health insurance or paid sick leave. Their training was minimal or non-existent, morale was low, and, not surprisingly, turnover was high. Yet these were the people charged with providing safety and security for tenants and visitors at many of the city's major commercial buildings.

The overwhelming number of these 63,000 workers had something else in common besides poor pay and few benefits. They were non-union employees.

Recently, CSS published "[Upgrading Security](#)," an update on the working conditions of the city's security officers covering the years 2004 to 2011. CSS found that unionization of the industry has played a significant role in raising wage levels and benefits for security officers.

The overwhelming number of workers employed as security officers in New York City are men of color, half with a high school education or less, groups that experience high rates of joblessness. The ability of unionization to boost wages for these workers has positive implications for the well-being of the city's black and Latino communities.

Increased Unionization

Beginning in 2006, unionization of the security industry in New York City increased dramatically. By 2011, Local 32BJ of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) had organized close to 10,000 workers, a tenfold increase since 2006, with unionized security officers having a major presence in midtown and Manhattan's large commercial office buildings and institutions of higher education.

Median wages for security officers rose by 31.3 percent between 2004 and 2011, an increase of over \$3 an hour. During that time span, median wages for all workers in the city increased by 17.7 percent. A comparison of wage trends for security officers in New York City, the wider metropolitan area, and the United States show that wages rose most sharply for the city, somewhat less for the region, and least for the nation. The greater wage gains in New York, where union activity was concentrated, made the difference.

A change in the composition of the workforce from 2000 to 2010 has been a shift in the age distribution among New York City security officers. The workforce is now older, with nearly a quarter of security officers ages 55 and over, compared to 16.9 percent ten years ago. Younger workers, ages 16 to 24, who made up 15 percent of workers in 2000, now account for less than 10 percent. This should be kept in mind when considering the adequacy of wages in the industry. These are not mostly young people just starting out but more likely to be experienced workers with families to support.

Educational attainment has also increased among security officers. While 37.4 percent had at least some college a decade ago, that number rose to half by 2010. The shift to older, more educated workers is partially the result of higher pay and better benefits. The recession also had its effect, when better educated workers who lost their jobs were forced to seek work in lower paying employment.

Raising Wage Levels

At a time when private-sector unions have been losing ground, and public-sector unions have increasingly come under attack, 32BJ's recent success in organizing security officers in New York City serves as an important reminder of the critical role unions play in raising wage levels and improving conditions for low-paid workers. It is also important to remember that, unlike many other low-wage jobs, the security industry cannot be outsourced.

Yet the increased wages for security officers are barely enough to lift a family above the federal poverty level. Even now, one in five security officers reports receiving food stamps and Medicaid. Unionization is just a first step. We must find a way to create a career path out of poverty for young people of color. There is still work to be done to bring these workers into the middle class.

David R. Jones, Esq., is President and CEO of the Community Service Society of New York (CSS), the leading voice on behalf of low-income New Yorkers for over 168 years. The views expressed in this column are solely those of the writer. The Urban Agenda is available on CSS's website: www.cssny.org.

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