

A Woman's Place Is in Her Union

By Arlene Holt Baker, executive vice president, AFL-CIO

I got my first job in high school in the 1960s because of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, working after school for the minimum wage of \$1.40 an hour. That may not sound like much, but it was certainly more than the \$6 a day my mother was earning as a full-time domestic worker.

My mom was and still is an inspiration to me. She refused to let my six siblings and me dwell on the fact that we didn't have a great deal. She would sacrifice to pay her poll tax in Texas, her church tithe, and her NAACP dues. And she deeply believed in volunteering for good causes. So early on, living and working—especially as a young woman of color and the daughter of Georgia Louise Leslie—meant struggle and determination and strength.

My outlook expanded and changed in 1972 when I joined the union movement. When I went to work for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, or AFSCME, in Los Angeles, I had the chance to work on behalf of equal pay for women who had joined together with their union sisters and brothers to seek higher wages, greater benefits, and a better life. That changed my life.

I'll never forget the women I met in those days. Years later, I went back to visit with them where they worked and to find out how they were doing. They told me that because of their union contracts they had the chance to buy their first homes or their first cars, or to send their kids to college. It was uplifting.

What I've discovered over the past 37 years is the same thing millions of other women know so very well. They can tell you that union membership isn't as important for women as it is for men—it is far more important for women. All too often, women are the first to be laid off, or denied a raise, or discriminated against, or passed by for promotions.

What I first witnessed with public-sector workers in California many years ago is still true all over our nation. I've seen that with a union, a telephone operator can own

a home. An assembly line worker can have health insurance and a vacation. A service rep can have a secure pension.

According to the most recent statistics, full-time working women with union cards are paid 32 percent more than nonunionized sisters.¹ Moreover, women in unions are far more likely to have job-based health insurance (75 percent compared to 51 percent for nonunion women)² and defined-benefit pensions (a staggering 77 percent compared to 20 percent for nonunion women).³

There's a powerful lesson in all of this. Every generation has its own mission for justice. In the past it was demanding the right to vote, marching against the sweatshops where young women were kept in terrible poverty, and fighting in the courts and Congress for our civil rights. Some of those missions were successful. Other missions continue.

For our own generation, I deeply believe that our mission today in a woman's nation is to help our sisters and daughters achieve economic security and find a place in the middle class. And I know that the best way to do that is to enable millions more women to join the union movement and win a better life for themselves and their co-workers. I know the difference it can make. It's my dream, and I'll do everything I can for as long as I can to help make it come true.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 AFL-CIO, "The Union Difference: Union Advantage by the Numbers" (January 2009), available at http://www.aflcio.org/joinaunion/why/uniondifference/upload/advantage_0109.pdf.
- 2 John Schmitt, "Unions and Upward Mobility for Women Workers" (Washington: Center for Economic and Policy Research, 2008), available at http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/unions_and_upward_mobility_for_women_workers_2008_12.pdf.
- 3 AFL-CIO, "Union Workers Have Better Health Care and Pensions" (2009), available at <http://www.aflcio.org/joinaunion/why/uniondifference/uniondiff6.cfm>.