



# ***NEWS from the Fiscal Policy Institute***

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## **Honoring Dr. King's Commitment to Unions 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Assassination in Memphis while Supporting Strike**

Forty years ago this week—on April 4, 1968—Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, while he was in Memphis supporting the unionization of African American sanitation workers. As he said the night before he was shot, amidst the soaring oratory of his historic “I’ve Been to the Mountaintop” speech: “The issue is the refusal of Memphis to be fair and honest in its dealings with its public servants.”

“All labor has dignity,” King had preached a few weeks earlier. “You are reminding, not only Memphis, but you are reminding the nation that it is a crime for people to live in this rich nation and receive starvation wages. And I need not remind you that this is our plight as a people all over America.”

To commemorate Dr. King’s commitment to unionization, the Center for Economic Policy Research (CEPR) and Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI) are releasing new data about unionization among blacks in the nation and in New York State.

“Unionization remains a critically important way for African Americans, and for all workers, to improve wages and working conditions,” said David Dyssegaard Kallick, senior fellow of the Fiscal Policy Institute. “African Americans face so many barriers in the workplace, it’s great to see that this is one economic indicator by which blacks are faring better than the overall population.”

Nationwide, 16 percent of black Americans are covered by a union contract, slightly more than the unionization rate for all workers in the U.S. of 14 percent, according to the CEPR analysis of pooled data for 2004-2007. The analysis includes both public and private sector workers.

In New York, according to the Fiscal Policy Institute release, 37 percent of all blacks are unionized, compared to 26 percent of all workers in the state. Black New Yorkers make up 14 percent of the overall workforce, and 19 percent of the unionized workforce. In total, New York has 407,000 unionized black workers, by far the largest number of any state, and the highest black unionization rate of any state for which data was available.

The second-highest number is in California, which has 210,000 unionized black workers and a unionization rate among blacks of 25 percent.

Nationally, unionization raises the pay of African American workers by 12 percent, even after adjusting for differences in education, state of residence, and other factors, according to the CEPR report. Being in a union also substantially improves black workers' chances of having good benefits. Seventy-six percent of unionized black workers have employer-sponsored health insurance. Again, even after adjusting for other factors, black workers covered by a union contract are 16 percentage points more likely to have employer-provided health insurance and 19 percentage points more likely to have an employer-provided pension plan than black workers who are not unionized.

Unionization has an even more dramatic effect on black workers in low-wage jobs, according to the CEPR study. Among African-American workers in the 15 lowest-paying occupations, union members earned 14 percent more than those workers who were not in unions. In the same low-wage occupations, unionized black workers were 20 percentage points more likely to have employer-provided health insurance and 28 percentage points more likely to have a pension plan than their non-union counterparts.

Overall, workers increasingly want unions as a way to improve their wages and working conditions. A December 2006 poll by Peter Hart Research Associates found that 53 percent of non-managerial, non-union workers would likely vote for a union in their workplace, up from about a third in 1984. Unfortunately, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has made it increasingly difficult to form unions, prompting labor activists to call for employers to recognize a simple "card check" vote of workers rather than an NLRB election, and for national labor law reforms such as the Employee Free Choice Act.

One trend that would surely disturb Dr. King is the frequent pitting of African Americans against immigrants in the public debate. While it is sometimes assumed that immigrant workers will undercut labor unions, it is interesting to note that in New York State, 24 percent of union members are immigrants, and the same share—24 percent—of immigrants are union members, according to a separate study by FPI. The notion of pitting immigrants against blacks is particularly misguided in New York State, where one in five immigrants in New York is black, making the categories "black" and "immigrant" overlap significantly. Immigrants make up 21 percent of the population of New York State. (In all cases, immigrants are defined as people born in a foreign country.)

#### *Data sources*

For data on unionization rates and union workforce, state by state, see [www.fiscalpolicy.org](http://www.fiscalpolicy.org).

The national report from CEPR is available at: [http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/unions\\_2008\\_04.pdf](http://www.cepr.net/documents/publications/unions_2008_04.pdf).

FPI's report is based on data provided by the Economic Policy Institute.

FPI's study on immigration, *Working for a Better Life: A Profile of Immigrants in the New York State Economy*, is available at: [www.fiscalspolicy.org/immigration.html](http://www.fiscalspolicy.org/immigration.html).

Source for 2006 poll:

[http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/08/wtprw\\_unions.html](http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2007/08/wtprw_unions.html).

Source for historic polling:

[http://www.epi.org/content.cfm/webfeatures\\_snapshots\\_20070228](http://www.epi.org/content.cfm/webfeatures_snapshots_20070228).

*The Fiscal Policy Institute (FPI) is a nonpartisan research and education organization that focuses on tax, budget, and economic issues that affect the quality of life and the economic well being of New York State residents.*

*The Center for Economic and Policy Research is a nonprofit, nonpartisan Washington, D.C.-based organization conducting research on economic and social issues.*

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