

Women Bringing New Strength To Unions

By Dick Meister

Women are well on the way to overtaking men in the ranks of organized labor -- and for good reason. As a new study shows, women who've joined unions have significantly better pay and benefits than working women who have not joined.

Although only about a fifth of women workers overall currently belong to unions, they already make up about 45 percent of all unionized workers. They're expected to become a majority within a dozen years, according to the study by the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

The study makes clear the advantages of union membership that have attracted increasing numbers of women. Unionized women, for instance, average 11 percent or about \$2 an hour more than non-union women. Three-fourths of union women have employer-financed health care benefits, but only about half their non-union counterparts have those benefits. Three-fourths of the unionized women have pensions, less than half of those outside unions have pensions.

Like other unionized workers, they also can expect paid holidays and vacations and premium pay for overtime work.

The union advantage is particularly strong for women in lower-paid occupations -- food preparation workers, for example, cashiers, stock clerks, child-care workers, housekeepers, teaching assistants, security guards and others. About 11 percent of them are in unions, with median pay of \$12 an hour. That's \$3 an hour more than non-union women holding such jobs

There's an even greater advantage in benefits for the lower-paid women. About 60 percent of the lower paid women in unions have health care benefits, only a little over 25 percent of those who are not unionized. About 60 percent of the unionized workers also have pensions, only about 20 percent of the non-union workers.

Despite women's growing presence - and influence - in unions, and despite the 45-year-old federal Equal Pay Act, women in general still lag considerably behind men in compensation. Women in unions generally work under contracts that guarantee them the same pay and benefits as men doing the same work, one of the most important advantages that unionized women enjoy.

Women who aren't in unions often have no such guarantee, despite the law and state laws like it. Overall, women currently average only 77 cents in pay for every dollar earned by men. That's a difference of more than 20 percent. If that difference is to shrink, if sufficient pressure is to be put on government to finally guarantee women the pay equity that the law has long promised them, the pressure will have to come from unions.

And the pressure to get unions to act will have to come from women, as it undoubtedly will as the number of unionized women continues to grow. That growth is also crucial to the revitalization of the labor movement, as is the new growth in the number of younger unionists that was shown in another recent study by the Center for Economic Policy and Research.

As the economy has been worsening, workers aged 18 to 29 have been turning to unions, for the same reasons that more women in all age groups have been joining unions. The average pay of unionized young workers is more than 12 percent higher than that of non-union workers of the same age. They are twice as likely to have health care, three times as likely to have pensions.

Some say that the continuing increase in the number of women in unions combined with the continuing increase in the number of young members signals nothing less

than a rebirth of labor. And it could be. It could very well be.

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