

COMMUNICATIONS WORKERS OF AMERICA

# Report of the CWA National Women's Committee

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National Women's Committee 2023 Convention Reports

CWA National Women's Committee

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## Fighting for a Living Wage

*Megan Green, CWA Local 7076 and Elizabeth Mercado, CWA Local 1101*

*“We stand for a living wage. Wages are subnormal if they fail to provide a living for those who devote their time and energy to industrial occupations. The monetary equivalent of a living wage varies according to local conditions, but must include enough to secure the elements of a normal standard of living—a standard high enough to make morality possible, to provide for education and recreation, to care for immature members of the family, to maintain the family during periods of sickness, and to permit of reasonable saving for old age.”*

*Theodore Roosevelt*

### What is a Living Wage?

A living wage is an hourly wage that is calculated based on the cost of living in a particular location, which takes into account factors like the cost of housing, food, and childcare. It is based on the projected cost of living for a given area that will allow a worker and their family to meet their minimum basic needs. A living wage is literally what it sounds like, a wage that will provide the bare minimum for an individual or family to survive.

The Living Wage Calculator is a tool developed by MIT that calculates the living wage by county or state for a variety of family sizes (one or two adults with zero to three children)<sup>1</sup>. These numbers are updated annually based on cost of living. Current calculations report that across the United States, an average living wage is \$24.16 per hour, or \$50,252.80 per year, before taxes, for a family of four (two working adults, two children). California's living wage is the highest; for that same family, each adult would need to make \$30.54 per hour to make ends meet. CWA Women's Committee Report authors Liz Mercado and Megan Green live in New York and New Mexico and the living wage for a family of four is currently \$28.64 and \$22.43, respectively.

### The Minimum Wage Problem

The Poverty wage for 1 adult in the United States is \$6.19, the federal minimum wage is currently \$7.25 per hour and has remained stagnant since 2009 (US Department of Labor)<sup>2</sup>. Even in 2009, this was not a living wage, and it has gotten worse comparatively due to inflation over the past 14 years. Individual states have the ability to set higher minimum wages, yet only about half of the states have higher minimum wages than the federal rate. California's minimum wage is \$15.50 per hour, only half of the calculated living wage. New York's minimum wage is \$14.20 per hour and New Mexico's is \$12.00 per hour. All three states fall at least \$10 per hour below providing a living wage for their citizens, which leaves workers with a deficit of at least \$20,800

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<sup>1</sup> Glasmeier, Amy K. Living Wage Calculator. 2020. Massachusetts Institute of Technology. [livingwage.mit.edu](https://livingwage.mit.edu).

<sup>2</sup> United States Department of Labor, <https://www.dol.gov/general/topic/wages/minimumwage>

to make ends meet for their family each year. Even the states with the highest minimum wages don't come close to meeting the basic needs of our working families.

## **A Women's Issue**

For decades, the gender pay gap has persisted in the U.S. The gender pay gap is a discriminatory practice that women who have the same qualifications and perform the same job receive less compensation than men and for no justifiable reason. While progress has been made, the deficit between what men and women earn in the US has yet to close.

Currently in 2023 Women still earn \$0.83 cents per every dollar earned by a white male (United States Census Bureau)<sup>3</sup>. The gender pay gap is wider for Black, Hispanic, and Indigenous women, earning \$0.63, \$0.54 and \$0.51 cents respectively per every dollar earned by white men. Essentially, women, especially women of color, are more severely impacted by the lack of a living wage.

In a 2021 article, the Center for American Progress (CAP)<sup>4</sup> reports that, "Raising the minimum wage would be transformative for women," especially women of color. Women are disproportionately being paid less than men; while women only make up 45% of the workforce, 59% of workers making less than \$15 per hour are women. Raising the federal minimum wage from \$7.25 to \$15 per hour, although still not a living wage in most households, would benefit 19 million women in the United States workforce. Many of these women are working essential jobs: nursing assistants, childcare providers, and personal care aides. The authors conclude that "Raising women's wages would narrow the gender pay gap" and boost economic recovery by putting more money into the hands of women, who most often make the spending decisions for their families.

## **How can CWA fight for a Living Wage?**

CWA represents workers nationwide in both the private and public sectors; we have the means to push for policies at the local, state and federal levels. We have even more leverage to push for a living wage. While bills advancing general increases to the minimum wage are often met with huge opposition from the business community, if we are able to set higher wages for public workers, the private sector will need to fulfill the obligation to increase the minimum wage in order to be competitive in the labor marketplace.

During New Mexico's 2022 legislative session, Local 7076 were able to raise the minimum wage for public workers to \$15 per hour. However, the statewide minimum wage remained at \$11.50 per hour due to push back from private sector employers. In 2023, Local 7076 members are working with legislators to advance a \$16 per hour statewide minimum wage,

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<sup>3</sup> United States Census Bureau, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2022/03/what-is-the-gender-wage-gap-in-your-state.html>

<sup>4</sup> Boesch, Bleiweis, and Haider, 2021, Center for American Progress. Raising the Minimum Wage would be Transformative for Women. <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/raising-minimum-wage-transformative-women/>

which is based on the calculated living wage for a single worker. We are working together with our private sector union siblings to promote legislation for a higher statewide minimum wage.

Resources, including draft legislation, a fact sheet, and talking points will be created and shared with the broader CWA organization. Distributing these resources nationwide and encouraging CWA members to push for legislation to increase state and federal minimum wages would improve the quality of life for many. Unions were created to fight for a living wage for all workers. And decades later, it's time for CWA to bring an end to this fight.

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### **Intersectionality: A Needed Focus in the Fight for Gender Equality**

*Ann Vogler, CWA Local 2006 and Kimberly Liska, CWA Local 4302*

Feminism started as a movement to address and abolish gender inequalities and win suffrage for women. However, history has shown us that the feminist movement has in truth overlooked the critical issues of racial, gender, and class discrimination and how they intersect, jointly impacting women's experiences. This specifically was seen when suffragists Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton pushed for women's right to vote. They pushed for the right to vote for white women over obtaining the right for ALL women. This is just one example of how the fight for equality failed to be intersectional.

The concept of *intersectionality* was first introduced in 1989 by Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American law professor and civil rights activist. She provided a framework that must be applied to all situations women face, recognizing that all the aspects of identity enrich women's lived experiences, and compound and complicate the various oppressions women face. "It means that women cannot separate out numerous injustices because women experience them intersectionally."<sup>1</sup> Using an intersectional lens allows us to give a bigger voice to those experiencing overlapping concurrent forms of oppression, and thus, an understanding of the depths of inequalities facing all women. "Overall, this can lead to people in the feminist movement having a better understanding of compounding issues, such as how being Black, in poverty, and identifying as a woman can all intersect and create an experience that would be very different than a white, middle-class woman's experience."<sup>2</sup> To quote Crenshaw, "We might have to broaden our scope of how we think about where women are vulnerable, because different things make different women vulnerable." It is important to recognize that inequalities are not equal.

Using the concept of intersectionality in the fight for equality is important because CWA recognizes that we can no longer afford to allow systems of oppression to create division. Human rights, and most recently, women's rights have been under attack by political leaders who have

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<sup>1</sup> [Feminism and Intersectionality - A Brief History of Civil Rights in the United States - HUSL Library at Howard University School of Law, https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/women/intersectionality](https://library.law.howard.edu/civilrightshistory/women/intersectionality)

<sup>2</sup> [Feminism needs to emphasize intersectionality - The Beacon, https://www.upbeacon.com/article/2021/03/staffopinion-laura-emphasize-intersectional-feminism](https://www.upbeacon.com/article/2021/03/staffopinion-laura-emphasize-intersectional-feminism)

been successful in rolling back the clock on decades of social progress. It is time to tear down walls of division in society and build a bridge of commonality and shared goals. Intersectionality is often used in relation to feminism. Intersectional feminism acknowledges that while all women face oppression, all women are not equally oppressed. Not all women face the same challenges. Bringing attention to the effects of social struggles against injustices through solidarity between different marginalized groups is an effective way of improving the chances of overcoming these injustices<sup>3</sup>. Intersectionality increases possibilities for social activism, thereby increasing the chances of bringing about social change. "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single issue lives." These words, spoken by Audre Lorde, capture the essence of intersectionality<sup>4</sup>.

Given the diversity in the experiences of women, how can we build a strong feminist movement? We must first gain a better understanding of how important intersectionality is in the fight for true equality. CWA can specifically do this by adding definitions, exercises, and more conversation to the existing Anti-Racist and Gender Justice training programs. Leadership and activists should encourage diversity both on district and local human rights committees to help facilitate personal discussion and better understanding regarding areas of oppression and the idea of privilege and power. Coordinating women's and CR&E activities and goals also would allow us to embrace all issues whether it is a women's, race, or LGBTQ issue. Networking outside of our local union is also paramount to creating more power in the fight for equality. In an internet world dominated by social media, women can build solidarity through shared experiences and stories. Seek other points of view and keep in mind that often when you have a diverse group of people in an activist space, it falls on others to educate about the oppressions they face. What we need to do now is to make as much use of this networking-based feminism as possible, to discuss our agenda together and even seek political power mobilizing on feminist ideals. It is because political power will enable this movement to bring about the change that it wishes to bring forth. We need to occupy and rightfully claim public positions as much as possible. "Whether they are bureaucratic positions, judicial positions or legislative positions, our call for egalitarianism and other women's issues needs to be said, heard and adhered to in the halls of power itself."<sup>5</sup> The term union means uniting through strength and power. To truly bring about meaningful change, we must combat all forms of discrimination and give everyone an equal voice at the table.

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### **Mental Health and Our Membership**

*JoAngela Barroso, CWA Local 6143 and Marlene Jimenez, PHEW-CWA Local 7777*

*"Mental health is not a destination, but a process. It's about how you drive, not where you're going."*

*Noam Shpancer, PhD*

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<sup>3</sup> "What is Intersectionality? Why All Social Movements are Racial Justice Movements."

<https://www.mindbodygreen.com/articles/what-is-intersectionality-and-why-is-it-important>

<sup>4</sup> "What is intersectionality and why is it important?", <https://www.globalcitizen.org/en/content/what-is-intersectionality-explained/>

<sup>5</sup> Why Networking Is A Step In The Direction Of Intersectional Feminism.

<https://feminisminindia.com/2020/08/26/networking-digital-intersectional-feminism/>

Scores of women are suffering from mental illnesses in the U.S at present. American women always need to strike a balance between their professional career and their family. As a result, many women have severe nutritional deficiency, which can lead to mental health issues. In addition to that, unrealistic societal norms and discriminatory practices often may cause women to develop various types of chronic psychological disorders. It is necessary to provide these women with mental health support through the collective efforts of the community and raise awareness among them about the underlying causes, diagnoses and treatments of these disorders. There are certain types of mental health disorders which are a lot more common among women than men and it plays a major role in the state of women's overall physical and mental well-being.

Some of the most common behavioral disorders that women tend to develop are different types of anxiety disorder, suicidal thoughts or attempts, and various types of eating disorders.

Panic disorder, death phobia, social anxiety, etc. fall under the category of anxiety disorder while suicidal thoughts or attempts can be caused by major depressive disorder. Eating disorders such as anorexia, bulimia and binge are also quite common among women. These mental disorders can be caused or made worse by external stressors while other disorders could result from nutritional deficiencies<sup>1</sup>.

Now let us shed light on the major underlying causes behind so many women developing such disorders. Many women are working outside of the home and pursuing a professional career yet at the same time, they have to do household chores and raise kids. Many men in the past 10 years or so are staying home and taking care of the house, which means that more women are shouldering multiple responsibilities. As a consequence, these women are undergoing tremendous mental pressure and exhaustion. Moreover, gender discrimination and sexual crimes or harassment are causing additional troubles to women and can result in post-traumatic disorder and other kinds of mental illnesses<sup>2</sup>.

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Furthermore, negative sexualization of women is another major reason behind women succumbing to mental disorders. Some industries are misusing women's beauty and turning them into mere objects of sexual pleasure. Notably, teenage girls are constantly trying to imitate fashion models and getting "stressed out." Social media platforms have become a place for body shaming and making mockery which leads to low self-esteem. That is one of the main reasons why so many teenage girls feel depressed and eventually develop suicidal thoughts or even make suicide attempts! Domestic violence against women is also quite common and it is certainly one of the reasons why women fall into depression, suffering in silence. Lack of financial security, social stigma and cultural factors are ruining the lives of millions of women in the U.S. along with other parts of the world.

Some women consult psychiatrists who can prescribe medication while others go for psychotherapy and medication simultaneously. These medical treatments often reduce the symptoms and in some cases, the patients get fully cured. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI), one in five adults have had or currently are displaying symptoms of mental disorders<sup>3</sup>. It is imperative for us to raise awareness about these diseases and reach out to the women who are suffering from these.

One of the most effective ways to combat this issue is to form "trusted groups" within the



community. Building these connections will enable women to share their problems and receive mental health support from others in the community. These groups can help women directly by solving problems associated with families or colleagues, and also, they may provide support in the form of advice, financial aid or consolation. In our union, various types of committees such as equity committees or women's committees can serve this purpose very well. It is important to realize that everybody is a stakeholder in women's mental health and well-being and we need to share others' problems in order to lighten their burden on themselves.

To conclude, women's struggles are a reality which nobody should deny. It is high time that we took some actions in this regard. The government and NGOs can play a vital role in building unions which will pave the way for women to overcome their mental health issues<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> American Psychiatric Association. (2013). Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders. (5th ed). Washington D.C. (Book)

<sup>2</sup> Senicato, C., Soares de Azevedo, R.C., Berti de Azevedo Barros, M., (2018). Common mental disorders in adult women: Identifying the most vulnerable segments. (Journal Article)

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<sup>3</sup> Mental Health by the Numbers, <https://www.nami.org/mhstats>

<sup>4</sup> Role of non-governmental organizations in mental health in India, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3146177/>

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## **The Merry-Go-Round of Child Poverty**

*Yolanda Pearson, CWA Local 3204*

Nearly 11 million children in America live in poverty. That's one in seven children, who account for almost one-third of all Americans living in poverty. This amount should be inconceivable in one of the world's wealthiest nations, yet child poverty has persisted for decades. We see this on television and in our neighborhoods, yet little is done to correct this problem.

Although the pandemic has aggravated and drawn attention to the economic instability of too many children and their families, the factors that led to such high rates of child poverty in the U.S. predate the public health crisis. U.S. policy exposes children to poverty due to parents' unemployment, and single-parent households.

State and local legislation must support children and their families by addressing labor market inequalities and discrimination and enhancing the social safety net policy domains to guarantee all children thrive. This report addresses those goals; with political will and moral clarity, an America without poor children is possible.

Solutions exist to end childhood poverty. Among the many suggestions are the following: ensuring that all families have access to food aid, housing subsidies, and health care by reforming these programs.

For low-income families, this means: prioritizing structural reforms that address generational poverty through policies that target the racial wealth gap and inequitable school systems; making ends meet through measures such as improved unemployment insurance, paid family and medical leave, higher minimum wages, affordable childcare, and universal preschool, and enhanced tax credits for all.

As determined by the U.S. Census Bureau, the official poverty indicator has long been criticized for being restrictive and outdated, mainly because it assesses a family's resource needs based on a 1960s food budget. It does not account for essential expenses such as housing or childcare, nor does it consider regional variations in the cost of living.

U.S. child poverty is underreported. Housing, daycare, and regional costs are excluded. Although the 2011 Supplemental Poverty Measure (SPM) measures economic hardship, the poverty threshold includes food stamps, housing assistance, taxes, and out-of-pocket medical costs. The SPM demonstrates that government programs have an imperfect way of lowering poverty yet one can scarcely find anyone addressing the problem or finding a solution.

According to a recent United States Department of Agriculture survey, economic inequality is responsible for 93% of the increase in rural child poverty from 2003 to 2014.<sup>1</sup> That inequality has consequences beyond the monetary, adding to differences in learning and development indicators.

A full-time employee is required to meet minimum living standards. Children do not work and cannot earn their way out of poverty. No child should endure poverty regardless of their parents' labor market experience. In its inadequate and fragmented form, the social safety net imposes rigorous employment requirements, excludes those with little or little income, and leaves unemployed individuals and their families with few solid options. Based on observation, it is the result of concerted efforts over the past 50 years to decentralize and defund programs such as SNAP, Medicaid, and unemployment insurance (UI), as well as a pervasive false narrative that insists that the unemployed and others experiencing hardship do not deserve comprehensive government support. The government program formerly known as Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), a New Deal-era cash support program for low-income children, is an example. Participation in the program declined drastically when the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 transformed it into a more limited and underfunded Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) blocked grant.

Other systemic disparities aggravate the adverse effects on children facing poverty. Children living in poverty are more likely to attend under-resourced schools, reside in communities susceptible to persistent disinvestment, experience lousy health outcomes, and become recipients of welfare and victims of the criminal justice system.

Economic inequality is linked to other systemic inequalities, including education, housing, and health. These inequalities are closely tied to America's long history of racism and

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<sup>1</sup>. Understanding the Rise in Rural Child Poverty, <https://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/pub-details/?pubid=45543>.

discrimination, creating obstacles for children of color across the country and substantially impeding their economic mobility.

More than one in ten children live in neighborhoods with concentrated poverty, and African American and American Indian children are seven times more likely than their white counterparts to reside in areas that, due to histories of redlining and chronic underinvestment, are less likely to have employment opportunities for parents and safe places to play.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, a quarter of children living in poverty are evicted before age 15; this proportion is higher among children living in poverty. A recent study has established a link between a kid's neighborhood, long-term outcomes, and general economic mobility, implying that more significant salaries or work standards alone are insufficient to eliminate all variables that perpetuate child poverty. Inequalities aggravate child poverty.

I ask that locals across CWA agree upon taking actions that will include starting a food pantry in your community. We will speak with local officials, non-profits, and other community groups to learn more about the available resources to low-income families. We will compile all the help we find into a user-friendly database accessible to those in need. We will also use this to educate the community about programs available to them. We will implement weekend tutoring and mentoring for the youth in our communities and make our presence known to local schools by sponsoring children to various camps, showing up as mentors for children, and lending support to local boys and girls clubs. One child saved is a victory won; no child deserves a life of poverty in one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Children are the future of our nation, and we should treat them as such.

### **“Merry-Go-Round” by Langston Hughes**

*Where is the Jim Crow section  
On this merry-go-round,  
Mister, cause I want to ride?  
Down South where I come from  
White and colored  
Can't sit side by side.  
Down South on the train  
There's a Jim Crow car.  
On the bus we're put in the back—  
But there ain't no back  
To a merry-go-round!  
Where's the horse  
For a kid that's black?*

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<sup>2</sup> The Basic Facts About Children in Poverty, <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/basic-facts-children-poverty/>

## **Youth and Peer Mentorship in the Union: Engaging and Educating Women and the Younger Generation in Unions and the Labor Movement**

*LaTonya Wilcox, IUE-CWA Local 81381 and Elizabeth Mercado, CWA Local 1101*

The resurgence of the labor movement in this country presents a unique opportunity for leadership development. The key is mentorship, in particular mentoring the next generation and women into empowering positions. The influence, guidance, or direction one is given as a mentee enhances their growth in their perspective field.

Despite corporate efforts to tear down unions, the demand for unions has grown. The younger workforce in this country recognizes that unions help to level out the playing field between employees and employers. And, although few young workers entering the workforce today will start in union jobs, there has been an increase in the demand for union protections. 11% of the U.S. workforce belongs to labor unions compared to 35% in past years. Employers continue to make concerted efforts to decimate unions from their workplace and suppress organizing drives<sup>1</sup>. The momentum for advances of youth and women in the labor movement is building and moving toward equitable advancement and preservation.

While continuing the legacy of various institutions and whether in the social, political, or labor movements, mentorship is not restricted to age, gender, or level of expertise. The approach one takes to mentoring is exclusive to them. There is no right, or wrong way and one must choose what works best for them.

Mentorship affords all the opportunity to create a brighter future for themselves and their peers and, allows our younger generations and working women to thrive, providing a sense of hope of becoming successful leaders. As women are encouraged to apply in traditionally male-dominated fields more female-to-female mentorship is essential for equity, growth, and protection.

In the article, "American Women Gain Clout in Unions After Pandemic Sacrifices," Amelia Pollard and Simone Silvan noted that the "*unprecedented exodus of women from the workplace during the pandemic empowered those who remain, helping spur a resurgence in labor organizing as industries such as health care, education and retail confront an acute shortage of jobseekers. As unions and advocates gain more clout than they've had in years amid an increased appreciation for so-called essential workers, female-led professions like teaching and nursing are leading the way. Women are becoming a bigger share of the unionized workforce and have played key roles in some of the 45 strikes since August tracked by Bloomberg Law.*"<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Why Are Unions Popular with Young People?, <https://www.morningsidecenter.org/teachable-moment/lessons/why-are-unions-popular-young-people>

<sup>2</sup> American Women Gain Clout in Unions After Pandemic Sacrifices, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-11-03/american-women-gain-clout-in-unions-after-pandemic-sacrifices?leadSource=uv>

Mentorship amongst women is important as it helps create a more diverse leadership team with the opportunity to cultivate their confidence and open the door to multiple perspectives that strengthens the organization to face the challenges of the future.<sup>3</sup>

78% of women in senior roles have served as mentors at some point in their career; however, few have had mentors of their own. 63 percent of women reported that they have never had a formal mentor, while 67% of women recognize the importance of mentorship to the advancement and growth of their careers<sup>4</sup>

Recognizing that mentorship is important, here are some strategies and programs that CWA can build upon to support mentoring next generation of youth and female leaders. CWA currently has a Next Gen Program for those members 35 years of age and under. Our focus would be on those who are at the beginning stages of entering the workforce, high school, and college age. District 6 Vice President Cummings referred to High School Pipeline Programs in an effort to assist graduating high school students who are choosing manufacturing jobs as opposed to traditional college education. In the IUE-CWA Mentorship Program, there are mentors that present union history in high schools and discuss the labor movement.

Working with our union allies across the nation to support local community groups such as NAACP youth group, girls' and boys' youth clubs, and youth advocacy groups, we can provide baseline education and awareness of the impactful effectiveness of organizing and unionization. Utilizing and integrating all CWA's program work will increase our capacity to improve and protect the living standards and working conditions of members, their families, and continue to build the labor movement for future members.

CWA's Human Rights Department has multiple training modules which include a mentorship solution component that provides strategies for upward mobility. Revitalizing the "Next Gen" movement affords us all the opportunity to recruit mentors for boot camp training, recruit trainers, and establish a "train the trainer" program which includes information on unions along with their importance to our communities.

Emerging leaders like Laura Garza (Starbucks) and Christian Smalls (Amazon) had someone to influence and mentor them to structural activism and leadership. The children in our lives, our sons and daughters, nieces and nephews who have accompanied us to union meetings and protests have been privileged by the presence, knowledge, and influences of our union siblings. For example, one of the authors of this report, YoLanda, has a college age nephew who recently sat in as a guest to our diversity meeting and then after dinner with my union leadership he said to me, "Auntie, I know you travel and do a lot for the union but to see you engage with them and for them to hear your input is pretty dope...I understand now." My union family proudly poured so much knowledge and future opportunities into his 18-year-old life by example that it ultimately took root in his mind!

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<sup>3</sup> Mentoring Matters: The Importance Of Female Mentorship, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/committeeof200/2021/10/26/mentoring-matters-the-importance--of-female-mentorship/?sh=22f90f86ccaa>

<sup>4</sup> [https://media.ddiworld.com/research/women-as-mentors\\_research\\_ddi.pdf](https://media.ddiworld.com/research/women-as-mentors_research_ddi.pdf)

The future of unions belongs to our next generation and women and for unions to be effective they need strong leaders. Our time will eventually come as union leaders where we must pass the torch to our successors and the time to start preparing the next generation and women for leadership roles is now. In connecting with, nurturing, and inspiring our younger generations, we can generate a positive and long-lasting legacy. President Franklin D. Roosevelt said, **“We cannot always build the future for our youth, but we can build our youth for the future.”**

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## **Paid Benefits Leave and the Force of Workers**

*Yan Yan Teague, AFA-CWA Local 27019*

The United States has historically and consistently lagged behind developed countries in providing family leave benefits. Historically, women's employment was viewed as temporary, a job that would end once she got married. It was not until post-WWII that this belief began to shift as more women permanently remained in the workforce<sup>1</sup>. The second wave of feminism in the 1960s pushed lawmakers to finally address the issue of pregnancy and leave<sup>2</sup>. While there were a few different iterations, the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) used today was not introduced until 1993<sup>3</sup>.

FMLA allows taking unpaid 12 weeks of job-protected leave for specific family and medical reasons<sup>4</sup>. However, the United States and Australia are the only developed countries that do not provide paid leave to women in regards to childbirth<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, the 12 week leave policy is in contention with the World Health Organization's recommendation of a minimum of 16 weeks leave after childbirth<sup>6</sup>. With the consistent increase in costs of living, and the lack of a federal minimum wage increase, more and more American families are living paycheck to paycheck. In addition, the eligibility criteria for FMLA inherently exclude vulnerable populations in the labor workforce, low-wage workers and part time workers, many of whom are women. Without a guaranteed wage replacement during leave, maternity leave is neither an affordable option nor an effective benefit.

Although FMLA was introduced in 1993, amendments were not introduced until 2008 and 2009. Prior to 2009, airline crews did not qualify for FMLA and thus taking parental leave

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<sup>1</sup> Women and Public Policy: A Revolution in Progress, (Book, page 186); Janet C. Gornick and Marcia K. Meyers, Families That Work: Policies for Reconciling Parenthood and Employment, [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265725915\\_Families\\_That\\_Work\\_Policies\\_for\\_Reconciling\\_Parenthood\\_and\\_Employment\\_review](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/265725915_Families_That_Work_Policies_for_Reconciling_Parenthood_and_Employment_review)

<sup>2</sup> Pacific University of Oregon: Four Waves of Feminism, <https://www.pacificu.edu/magazine/four-waves-feminism>

<sup>3</sup> FMLA Act, <https://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title29/chapter28&edition=prelim>

<sup>4</sup> FMLA Website, <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fmla/>

<sup>5</sup> Maternity leave benefits in the United States: today's economic climate underlines deficiencies, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4262924>

<sup>6</sup> World Health Organization.;Health Aspects of Maternity Leave and Maternity Protection, [http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/maternal\\_mortality\\_2000/Health\\_aspects\\_of\\_maternity\\_leave.en.html](http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/maternal_mortality_2000/Health_aspects_of_maternity_leave.en.html).

was difficult, complicated and convoluted. On December 21, 2009, after intense lobbying and grassroots efforts by AFA-CWA members, President Obama signed into law the Airline Flight Crew Technical Corrections Act (S.1422). In 2015, the Department of Labor revised the definition of “spouse” in FMLA to ensure that eligible workers in same-sex marriages could take FMLA leave for their spouse or family member<sup>7</sup>.

A paid parental/medical leave is not only a good policy, but it helps equalize gender, racial and economic disparities. Additionally, a study has shown that a paid parental leave is not only beneficial for the economy, but also unemployment rates as individuals not employed seek out employment with paid leave<sup>8</sup>. A 2011 study estimated that women will lose \$324,044 of lifetime earnings due to caregiving responsibilities that affect their employment<sup>9</sup>.

For airline employees, who have an atypical job that is not a 9-5 job, airline management had claimed the law does not apply to them as they do not work a traditional 40 hour week because of the way the airlines compute their work hours. Since 9/11, airlines unions have been fighting to retain benefits and have not had the bargaining power to ask for a robust parental leave. Within the next three years, all seventeen airlines that AFA-CWA represents will begin or have begun negotiating new contracts. With the airline industry reporting record breaking profits in 2022, now is the time for AFA-CWA to bring a comprehensive parental/medical leave policy to the table.

Strengthening paid family leave at the bargaining table is important, but in order to make true progress we need comprehensive, national parental/medical leave that is inclusive of all family types. More and more we see family members taking care of children/parents that are not their biological family members. They should not be excluded from a paid leave. In alignment with the World Health Organization recommendation, the leave policy should be increased to 16 weeks for newborn/newly adopted children. Partners/fathers should also be included in the parental leave and be given the same amount of leave time as their partner/spouse. To ensure that paid leave is fair and equitable to both the worker and the employer, leave should include a minimum of 75% of the worker's wage. President Biden included paid family leave in his Build Back Better spending package, but it was cut after resistance from pro-business Senators.

CWA Locals should continue to fight to improve paid leave in their contracts and encourage members to write and call their Members of Congress to show support for comprehensive, national paid leave.

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<sup>7</sup> Final Rule to Revise the Definition of “Spouse” Under the FMLA. <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fmla/spouse>

<sup>8</sup> “Parental Leave Policies in Europe and North America,” *Gender and the Family Issues in the Workplace*, (Book, pages 133–56)

<sup>9</sup> The MetLife Study of Caregiving Costs to Working Caregivers: Double Jeopardy for Baby Boomers Caring for Their Parents. <https://www.caregiving.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/mmi-caregiving-costs-working-caregivers.pdf>



## The Pink Wave

*Erin Mardon, NABET-CWA Local 51021 and Tonia Dumas, CWA Local 9400*

Screw the Supreme Court.

“I am angry. Angry and upset and determined.” Senator Elizabeth Warren

Shock and outrage erupted across the country on May 3rd, 2022, as news leaked of a Supreme Court decision to overturn *Roe vs. Wade*, the landmark 1973 ruling that established the constitutional right to abortion. This was a decision that would impact 25 million people. All women! At the time, 22 states would have bans, or could ban abortion if the decision were overturned<sup>1</sup>. Without federal protections, more would follow. Just 16 states and the District of Columbia had laws in place to protect the rights of women.

By June, it was done. *Roe v. Wade* was overturned. There was devastation. There were tears. There were protests. But more importantly, and more quietly, women did something that would ensure their voices were heard.

Over the next month, the number of women registering to vote rose by 35%, in the states that share voting data<sup>2</sup>. Those states include Kansas, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Oklahoma, Florida, North Carolina, Idaho, Alabama, New Mexico and Maine. Women were registering at a faster pace than men, especially in states where abortion rights were at risk, like Wisconsin and Michigan. In the months following, on average, 55% of new voters in those states were women.

In Kansas, in the week after the decision was announced, 70% of new voters were women<sup>3</sup>. The swell in new, female voters continued all the way through an August primary, where strong Democratic support helped kill a referendum that would have ended abortion rights in the state.

Even more surprising, the phenomenon was not exclusive to states without protections in place. Even in the female-led and historically blue New York State, which has some of the most comprehensive abortion protections in place, the decision appeared to spark the need to make the female voice heard. In the Republican-leaning Rensselaer County, more than 1,200 women registered in the month directly following the decision<sup>4</sup>. In Albany County, home of the State Capitol, where voters just elected their first female governor, that month brought more than 2,300 women the right to vote<sup>5</sup>.

For months leading up to the midterm elections of 2022, analysts and pollsters alike predicted a “Red Wave.” Massive losses for Democrats were expected - to the tune of dozens of seats in Congress. As the results poured in the night of November 8th that wave never

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<sup>1</sup> *Roe v. Wade* Overturned: Our Latest Resources. <https://www.guttmacher.org/abortion-rights-supreme-court>

<sup>2</sup> After *Roe's* End, Women Surged in Signing Up to Vote in Some States. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/08/25/upshot/female-voters-dobbs.html>

<sup>3</sup> After *Roe's* End, Women Surged in Signing Up to Vote in Some States. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/08/25/upshot/female-voters-dobbs.html>

<sup>4</sup> New York State Board of Elections. <https://www.elections.ny.gov/EnrollmentCounty.html>

<sup>5</sup> New York State Board of Elections. <https://www.elections.ny.gov/EnrollmentCounty.html>



materialized. Democrats held the Senate. Even as Republicans gained control of the House, it was by a razor-thin margin. That night it became clear. This time, women were making the decisions.

The November midterms saw a record number of abortion-related proposals this year<sup>6</sup>. Five states had midterm ballot initiatives, not including the measure in Kentucky. It was a clean sweep: all five measures were rejected. Voters in several more states chose to officially protect women's rights.

Many Republican candidates who publically supported the end of *Roe v. Wade* lost their elections. The party as a whole underperformed, failing to capture the Senate, and just barely gaining control of the House. The Red Wave became more of a ripple.

An NBC News exit poll made it clear. Many Americans said protecting the right to abortion was the thing driving their vote. Among women, specifically, 33% said it mattered more than any other issue.

Supreme Court members and their supporters decided to bully women into doing what they felt was right for women. For years, women have been bullied in every facet of life from corporate, political, and union offices, to fighting for the right to vote, to choosing what to do with their own bodies. CWA must continue to encourage our members not only to register to vote in their state, but to actively exercise that right to make their voices heard. We can do this by reaching out to our union siblings across the nation, to make sure they know what's on the table in their own states. We can work to support candidates who are dedicated to protecting women's rights. We must also work to protect voters' rights, in states where they are under attack by volunteering and attending women's rights events throughout the year. We must also make it clear: our members will not be bullied, in any aspect. We will fight back. And we will win.

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<sup>6</sup> What Voters Want: Abortion Access, Higher Wages and Election Changes Top List. <https://www.ncsl.org/state-legislatures-news/details/what-voters-want-abortion-access-higher-wages-and-election-changes-top-list>

### **Summary and Recommendations**

- Working people across the U.S. lack a living wage and are instead faced with a meager federal minimum wage, creating poor standards of living for individuals and families.
- The Family and Medical Leave Act provide workers with only a small amount of unpaid leave for particular medical and family-related reasons.
- The recent overturning of *Roe v. Wade* has stripped individuals of reproductive freedom; and
- Such deficiencies in pay, leave, and bodily autonomy result in serious threats to mental health, not to mention survival.
- Such challenges are multiplied for marginalized communities.
- A lack of appropriate education has perpetuated the aforementioned inhumane conditions, as well as deluded people into believing that change is impossible.

Therefore, the National Women's Committee hereby urges CWA Locals:

1. To engage in voter registration campaigns and promote civic engagement to fight harmful legislation against fair pay, leave, and bodily autonomy;
2. To foster community in Locals by conducting work through an intersectional lens that recognizes the various effects of oppression on different people, and that prioritizes mental health; and
3. To educate community youth on such work to create a better future for both young people and unions.