

For women workers, unions mean equality

By Rebecca Westleigh, Shianne Valenzuela and Mary Hall

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Did you know that in Maine, women earn an average of 76 cents for every dollar that men earn for doing the same work? This inequality is made worse when one considers that women are already more likely than men to work in low-wage, service-sector jobs. Consequently, nearly 15 percent of Maine's mothers, sisters and daughters are living below the poverty line. These women are working and still living in poverty.

This is wrong, and it is happening on our watch.

The following are our stories — three women who found equality in wages and work as union members in Maine. We all agree: having a voice on the job and collective bargaining rights has dramatically improved our lives and enabled us to support our families. We want to see those benefits and opportunities extended to all workers. We don't pretend our stories are extraordinary; however, they are frighteningly less ordinary than they should be.

- I, Rebecca, am a single mother and work as a telephone installation and repair technician for FairPoint. I'm a member of the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers Local 2327. Union membership has enabled me to care and provide for my child and helped me be a better parent. Unlike too many single mothers in Maine, I don't have to worry about choosing whether to pay the rent or take my son to the doctor when he is sick. The benefits and wages my union has collectively bargained for have allowed me to save for my son's college education and have provided me the security that too many Maine women are living without.
- As a young woman working in a shoe shop, I, Mary, once inquired why a male worker doing the exact same job was being paid twice as much. I was told that because he had a family and I did not, he was getting paid more. I told my boss that kind of treatment would mean I could never afford to have a family. Today, I work at Elmet Technologies in Lewiston and a member of the union there. Having a union contract has meant equal wages for equal work, regardless of personal circumstance or gender. It has also meant a pension and retirement security.
- A safe work environment should be the rule for all workers; never the exception. I, Shianne, worked non-union construction jobs where low wages coupled with lax safety and training practices made work a

high-risk and low-reward proposition. Today, I work as a union electrician and am a member of IBEW 567. In addition to better wages that help me provide for my family, the union has been instrumental in ensuring safety practices are duly implemented and training opportunities are available. The union apprenticeship program has provided excellent career training while allowing me to earn a living at the same time.

American women in unions earn 32 percent more than women who are not in unions, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Furthermore, female union members are 22 percent more likely to have health care coverage than their non-union women counterparts.

These statistics have real effects on the lives of women and working families, as futures are mortgaged to secure a borrowed today. Reducing purchasing power and the ability to save hurts the economy, locally and nationally.

We are not suggesting that unions are perfect. They're not. But as our stories highlight, they dramatically improve people's lives and they go a long way to ensure workers are treated with respect and equality, can support their families with good earnings and benefits, and have safe, fair working conditions.

We were lucky enough to come into jobs that were already union. Millions of workers who would like to form a union and have the same rights and benefits we do are currently denied a fair opportunity by our broken, company-dominated labor law system. When private sector workers try to organize, they regularly face intimidation, harassment and an outdated set of rules that do not protect their right to organize. We want to see our labor laws updated so that workers can freely and fairly form their own organization and their rights are protected.

Now more than ever, we need to rebuild an economy that works for everyone. We strongly encourage our senators to support Mainers and women by voting for the Employee Free Choice Act. This common sense legislation would give workers the freedom to join a union without intimidation and bargain collectively for better wages and benefits.

Corporate leaders can run companies into the ground and receiving million dollar bonuses, while women and working families work 40 hours a week and are forced to go on welfare. It's a sin, and we can make it stop. We need to pass the Employee Free Choice Act.

Rebecca Westleigh and Mary Hall of Lewiston, and Shianne Valenzuela of New Gloucester, are union workers.