



“African American and Hispanic American workers on strike against Kellwood, wearing placards that encourage support for better wages” by Kheel Center, Cornell University Library, licensed under CC BY 2.0.

# The Impact of Unions on Workers Amid the COVID-19 Pandemic

Madison Charnigo

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on workers of all disciplines worldwide since March 2020. The International Labor Organization states that in the second quarter of 2020, working hours around the globe were reduced by 17.3%, equating to the loss of 495 million full-time jobs. This sudden collapse of norms within workplaces and loss of wages has the potential to have detrimental impacts on the lives of workers world-wide.<sup>1</sup>

In his recent presentation at Purdue University, Dr. William Spriggs, a Professor of Economics at Howard University, discussed the impact of unemployment on marginalized workers and the disproportionate effect of the onset and continuation of the pandemic on different groups and industries. Dr. Spriggs shared that the leisure and hospitality industry as well as public sector employees were the most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, heightened by the fact that there is not adequate support for employees in these industries.<sup>2</sup>

Prior works of William Spriggs highlight wage discrepancies between upper and lower classes, and this trend remains consistent during the pandemic as lower income countries experienced much worse impacts than higher income countries. This is demonstrated as lower middle-income countries had a 43% larger reduction in working hours than higher income countries. Other facets of the socio-economic inequalities have also been highlighted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the United States, low-income and low-skill workers were much more likely to have reduced working hours or have lost their jobs.<sup>3</sup> Dr. Spriggs continued to highlight this point by sharing information in his presentation about the impact on various ethnic groups, as well as the lack of access to support and benefits. Dr. Spriggs noted that the Pandemic Unemployment Assistance (PUA) resulted in a disparate impact on Black workers' access to Unemployment Insurance (UI). It was also noted that Black workers were the least likely to receive or qualify for unemployment

insurance during the peak of the pandemic in April and May 2020. With lack of access to UI, Black workers are unprotected during employment losses like the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic. This makes it more difficult for these workers to job search and earn wages while not earning unemployment benefits.<sup>4</sup>

Workers with disabilities have also had disproportionate struggles during the pandemic, and the disease they are potentially exposing themselves to by going to work has the potential to cause serious long-term illness or death for themselves and their families. Additionally, if immunocompromised workers are to be infected with COVID-19, they lose a disproportionate number of working hours as compared to average workers as they often experience more severe illness.<sup>5</sup>

Because many different groups of workers have suffered as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, unions are a crucial source of protection for workers and should be supported and amplified in order to preserve economic growth. Unions have the ability to have monumental impacts on minority workers with studies indicating that Black workers protected by unions are paid 13.7% more than non-unionized Black workers.<sup>6</sup>

Unionized workers during the pandemic have experienced many crucial benefits including enhanced safety measures in the workplace, additional premium pay during the pandemic, paid sick time, and increased say in terms of furloughs in order to retain jobs. These benefits allow minority, disabled, and immunocompromised workers to be financially supported and also have the ability to stimulate the economy by increasing the number of workers who are willing and able to work in a time of crisis.<sup>7</sup>

With increased support by unions, both workers and the overall economy would experience tremendous benefits during the crisis of the current pandemic, and future economic crises specifically related to climate catastrophes as predicted by Dr. Spriggs. Unions demonstrate the ability to make

institutions more productive, with data demonstrating that with higher union density, both productivity and wages for workers increase. The current studies clearly indicate that when workers feel their work is being adequately valued as demonstrated through voicing their wage and benefits needs through unions, they become more productive. With increased productivity, there ultimately is the potential to reverse the economic downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and return to normalcy even before the virus and its impacts on society are eradicated.<sup>8</sup>



"An Asian American and an African American woman wear signs that indicate that they are on strike against Ottenheimer for poor treatment and unfair labor practices, December 1, 1966." by Kheel Center, Cornell University Library is marked with CC BY 2.0.

## Notes

1. Tom Shakespeare, Ndagire Florence, and Queen E Seketi. 2021. "Triple Jeopardy: Disabled People and the COVID-19 Pandemic." *The Lancet* 397 (10282): 1331–33. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736\(21\)00625-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0140-6736(21)00625-5).
2. William Spriggs, "Visiting Scholars Series: A Post Pandemic World with William Spriggs", YouTube, Purdue Honors College, January 24, 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRZRyG8\\_0uM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MRZRyG8_0uM)
3. Shakespeare, Florence, and Seketi, 1.
4. Spriggs, 11:34
5. "Work and Well-Being during COVID-19: Impact, Inequalities, Resilience, and the Future of Work." 2021. *World Happiness Report*. 2021. <https://worldhappiness.report/ed/2021/work-and-well-being-during-covid-19-impact-inequalities-resilience-and-the-future-of-work/>.
6. "Why Unions Are Good for Workers—Especially in a Crisis like COVID-19: 12 Policies That Would Boost Worker Rights, Safety, and Wages." 2020. *Economic Policy Institute*. 2020. <https://www.epi.org/publication/why-unions-are-good-for-workers-especially-in-a-crisis-like-covid-19-12-policies-that-would-boost-worker-rights-safety-and-wages/>.
7. "Why Unions Are Good for Workers—Especially in a Crisis like COVID-19: 12 Policies That Would Boost Worker Rights, Safety, and Wages." 2020., 3.
8. Edward Ongweso, "Study Finds Unions Make Companies More Productive." 2020. *Vice.com*. 2020. <https://www.vice.com/en/article/z3bjn9/study-finds-unions-make-companies-more-productive>.