

What about Excluded Workers?*

Unions and Grassroots Organizations Make a Difference

Darby Corniel

BEFORE YOU READ:

1. Think about the word *excluded*. (It means the opposite of included.) Read the pull-out quote on p. 8 to learn more about how it is being used in the context of this article.
2. Share the experience of someone you know who was an excluded worker during the pandemic. What happened to them?
3. Discuss the term *disparities*. See the box on this page with a link to an article to learn more.

The Pandemic Exposed and Deepened Disparities

Many of us are aware of the racial and economic disparities in our society. We know that some people live their lives with a lot fewer resources than others do. We have huge inequities in wealth, housing, education, health care, and jobs. But the pandemic deepened these inequities and exposed them even more. The horrors of the pandemic left

The horrors of the pandemic left many of us shivering, astonished by what the pandemic revealed.

many of us shivering, astonished by what the pandemic revealed.

Once again, those with fewer resources were the hardest hit in all areas. Here are just

a few of the ways that racial and economic disparities showed up during the pandemic:

- New York City lost 1.25 million jobs, of which 75% were in low-wage sectors such as restaurants, hospitality, retail, the arts, and neighborhood services.¹ The job losses among minorities and communities of color

were higher than in any other communities.²

- The rate of infection and death by Covid was higher in communities of color.³
- Children in low-income communities and communities of color were less likely to have high-speed internet and the proper devices to participate in school. This “digital gap” contributed to education inequity.⁴
- Many immigrant families lost jobs. However, because of their immigration status, they did not qualify for stimulus checks or unemployment, so they suffered more.⁵

Workers dealt with these disparities in different ways. Some faced every challenge on their own, maybe with the help of family or from a neighborhood food pantry that could help them at least have something to eat.

What Are Disparities?

Disparity means difference. For example, since 1978, compensation for CEOs rose by 1,322%. Compensation for the average worker rose by 18% during this same period. There is a large disparity in the rate at which compensation grew for these two groups of people. Learn more about the concept of disparities by reading “Is It in Proportion?” in *The Change Agent: Issue 53*, pp. 24-26.



Source: <https://www.cnn.com/2021/09/15/in-2020-top-ceos-earned-351-times-more-than-the-typical-worker.html>

* This an advanced version of the story published on pp. 13-14.



We Make The Road NY organized immigrant workers and advocates to rally in favor of including funding in the state budget for those who have been excluded from pandemic relief. Photo from fundexcludedworkers.org

Others got support from their union, which made the burden a little easier to carry. I am privileged to work for the Consortium for Worker Education (CWE), an organization that partners with unions and community-based organizations to provide training and employment services to workers in New York City. Here is the story of what we did to ease the crisis for our workers.

Unions Take Action to Address Disparities

On March 16, 2020, when the state of New York was officially put on pause, the executive team at the CWE got on the phone to address the new reality. What would this mean for workers, and what could we do to support them? We knew that many people would be left behind by a system that doesn't acknowledge workers by their effort and output, but instead excludes them because of the "legality" of their immigration status.

What Are Unions?

"A union is a group of workers. They come together to protect their rights and fight for their interests." Learn more about unions by reading "The State of Unions in Four Graphs" in *The Change Agent*: **Issue 53**, pp. 12-14; and in **Issue 36**, pp. 37 and 48-54 (where you will find various articles about unions, worker organizations, and collective action).



Source: Mark Trushkowsky's article in Issue #53 of *The Change Agent*, pp. 12-13. Photo by Jay Mallin, [Creative Commons](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



After 23 days, the hunger strikers broke their fast and a \$2.1 billion Excluded Workers Fund was passed in New York in April 2021. Photo from fundexcludedworkers.org.

Our partners began to pivot. In the spring of 2020, the education programs started working closely with their students, many of them beginning English language learners, helping them to navigate Zoom to make sure they could continue their classes remotely. The unions started trying to figure out how to provide personal protective equipment (PPE) to their members who worked in high-risk jobs. By early summer, our partners began providing a different kind of assistance to students. For example, they helped them locate loved ones who died from Covid-19 in the NYC hospital system, and they distributed food to their members who could not feed their families.

When the federal government launched the Cares Act, undocumented workers were completely left out. They could not claim unemployment benefits. So we joined the fight for a new law

in New York called “The Excluded Workers Act.”

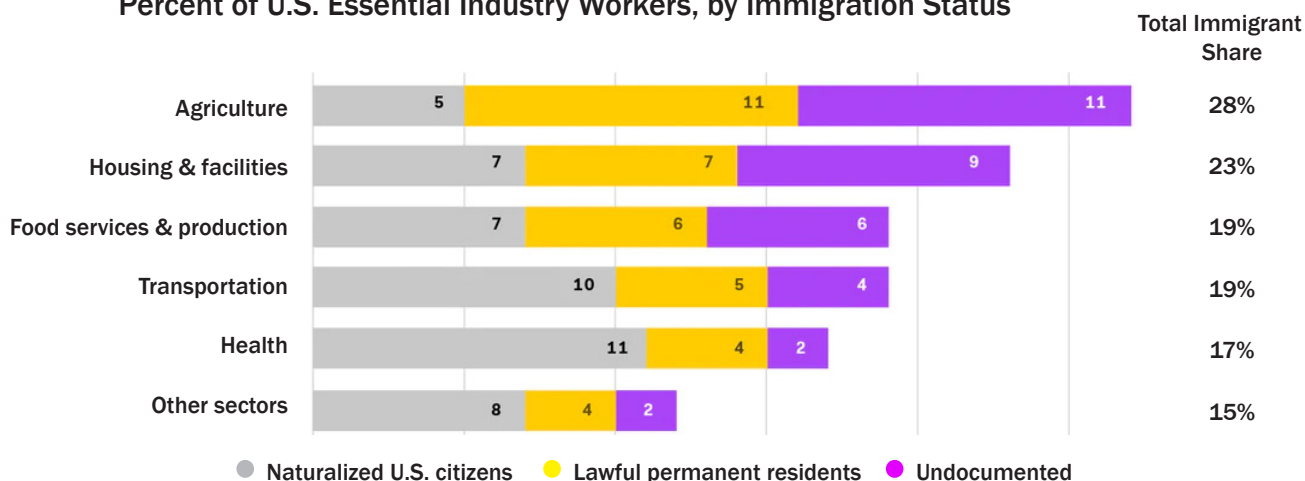
Excluded workers are people who do not qualify for unemployment benefits due to their immigration status. Many of them are fathers and mothers who have worked in this country their entire adult lives. Some are parents of U.S. citizens. They are hardworking taxpayers. They are pillars of our communities. Yet when they lost their jobs through no fault of their own, they could not collect unemployment. The Excluded Workers Act would allow these undocumented workers to receive unemployment.

Meanwhile, unions began reaching out to us asking for our help. They wanted their members to get training so they could be ready for the future. They wanted their members to learn computer skills and how to use zoom. One of the unions opened their office so that members could stop by and collect tablets they needed for their training.

RWDSU president, Stuart Applebaum, demanded that New York City make it mandatory for customers to wear masks to enter two of the union’s biggest employers, Macy’s and Whole

Immigrants Make Up High Shares of U.S. Essential Workers

Percent of U.S. Essential Industry Workers, by Immigration Status



Study the chart above. Make several true statements about the data in the chart. Source: <https://www.fwd.us/news/immigrant-essential-workers/>

Foods. This is an example of how workers are more powerful if they have a union behind them. Without a union, a worker is on her own advocating for her safety. With a union, all workers have a strong organization to advocate for what is safe. This was before many businesses made wearing masks a requirement to enter their establishment.

As I listened to union leaders share their desire to protect their members, I thought about all the workers who don't have a union. How were they surviving the crisis? They might be searching for the closest food pantry or trying to apply for cash assistance from a local community organization. How would this crisis be different for them if they were members of unions? Certainly, they would not be "worry free," but at least they would have a strong support system.

A Remarkable State Law: The Excluded Workers Act

We are still far away from a fair recovery, but I see unions fighting for what they believe their members—and all workers—deserve. We have won

some battles, and others we are still fighting. The Excluded Workers Act passed on April 6, 2021. At the front lines of that fight, unions were joined by grassroots organizations, such as Make the Road NY and New York Communities for Change, among others. This new state law is a remarkable win for undocumented workers. It helps address the massive inequities that existed before the pandemic and have only gotten worse since the pandemic.

As we continue moving forward and reopening our economy, the reality is that we have lost many jobs that won't come back.⁶ Self-checkout substituted cashiers, and call center employees have been replaced by robots. About 20% of business travel won't come back; this means fewer jobs at hotels, restaurants, and downtown shops.

We are still far away from a fair recovery, but I see unions fighting for what they believe their members—and all workers—deserve.

Restaurants using “scan menus” for customers to place their own orders means they need fewer staff than before.

Workers who used to have these jobs will need training so they can re-enter the job mar-

Unions play an important role in fighting for every worker to receive their fair share.

ket. However, we don’t want to just train them for new jobs, we want to make sure they earn a living wage at their new job. Unions help workers get more power so they can earn higher wages and benefits, and have

some dignity on the job. There is a lot of work to be done to address the inequities in our economy and our society. I believe that unions play an important role in fighting for every worker to receive their fair share.

Endnotes:

1. <http://www.centrernyc.org/reports-briefs/2020/6/29/the-covid-19-new-york-city-economy-three-months-in-reopening-and-a-continuing-low-wage-worker-recession>
2. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2020/business/coronavirus-recession-equality/>
3. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/covid-data/investigations-discovery/hospitalization-death-by-race-ethnicity.html>
4. <https://thejournal.com/articles/2020/05/14/poverty-race-linked-to-lack-of-internet-for-students.aspx>
5. <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/news/cares-act-excluded-citizens-immigrants-now-covered>
6. <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/the-future-of-work-after-covid-19#>



Darly Corniel (pictured above) is the education director of the Consortium for Worker Education in New York City. She immigrated to New York from Venezuela in 1997 with a Bachelor’s degree in Economics. She went to CUNY-LaGuardia Community College where she took English classes, and then after finding more confidence in her English, she attended New School for her Master’s in Organizational Change Management. She lives in New York City and is the proud mom of Sebastian, her ten-year-old son. Darly is passionate about workforce development and Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). She believes that all workers deserve a fair chance to live and work with dignity.

AFTER YOU READ:

1. According to the author, what disparities did the pandemic expose?
2. What are some of the things unions did to try to support their members during the pandemic? Cite specific examples from the text.
3. What are excluded workers? What NY state law did unions and community organizations work to get passed to address their needs?
4. How does the author feel about unions? How do you know?
5. What is the current status of the fund to support excluded workers? Conduct your own research online to find out.
6. Darly Corniel mentions some large numbers in this article. To help make sense of these numbers, read the article on pp. 11-12.