

# The Role and Value of Social and Labor Protections: Results from the 2024 Empire State Poll

Worker Institute Policy Brief  
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## INTRODUCTION

The 2024 Empire State Poll surveyed 2,686 respondents in August 2024.<sup>3</sup> New Yorkers from all 62 New York counties participated in the 2024 Empire State Poll (ESP), carried out by the Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR). This policy snapshot summarizes findings from questions pertaining to respondents' wages and benefits and their perception of social and labor protections.<sup>4</sup>

## RECEIPT OF EMPLOYER-SPONSORED BENEFITS

An important, underlying component to the analysis presented in this policy brief is the relationship between education and individual income. We analyzed the relationship between these two variables and found a strong correlation. Indeed, 52.4% of the variation in income can be explained by one's education level. In other words, the more education one has, the higher one's earnings are (see Appendix, Table 1).

We then asked those respondents who indicated that they were currently working for an employer (n=1,478 weighted observations) what employer-sponsored benefits they received (see Figure 1). The five benefits most respondents indicated that their employer offered included paid sick leave (73.7%), paid vacation (74.8%), paid federal holidays (65.7%), a pension/retirement plan (61.5%) and health insurance (70.1%). Dental (58%) and vision (52.3%) were next, followed by paid family leave (49.3%).

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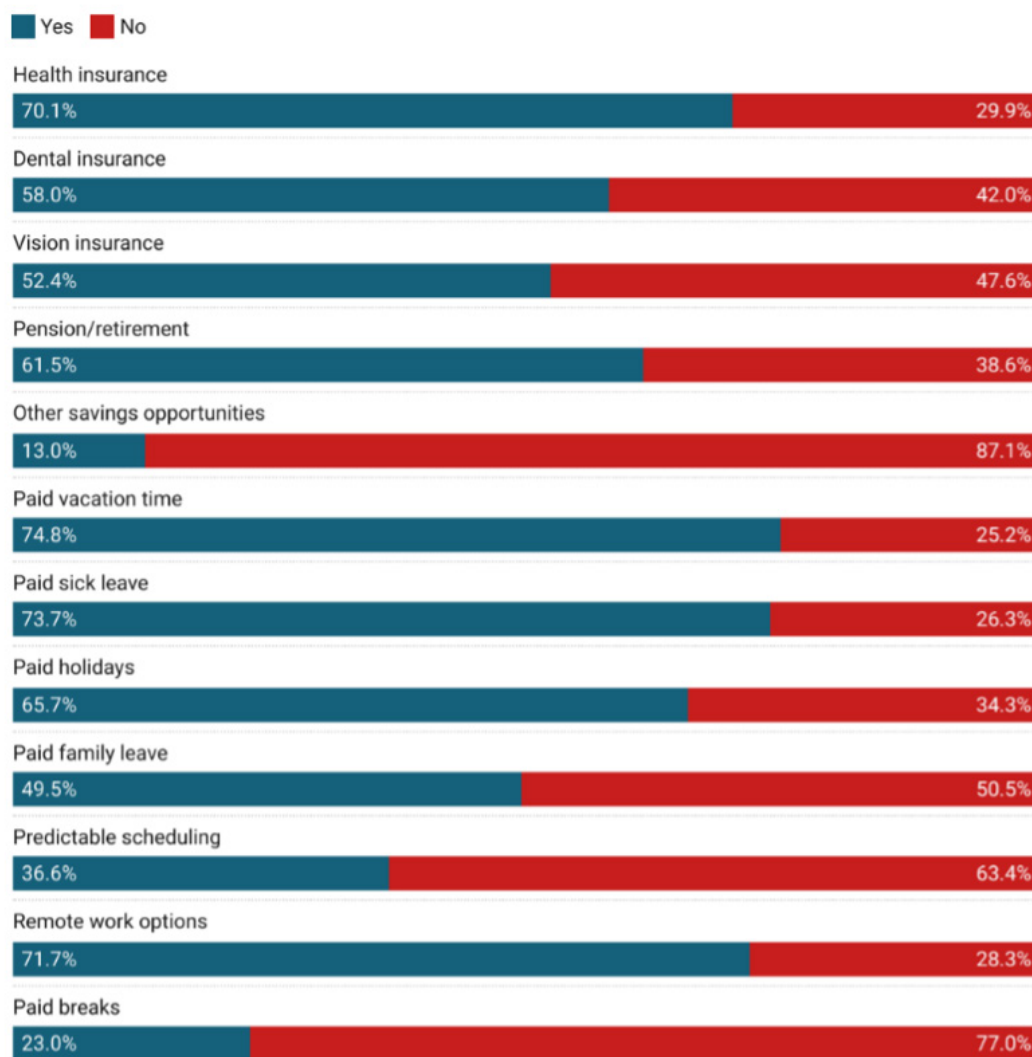
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3 The Empire State Poll uses a blended sampling design that combines randomly selected respondents from SSRS's probability-based Opinion Panel (n = 1,043) as well as opt-in respondents from their nonprobability panel partner, Dynata (n = 1,643). Respondent recruitment was targeted to ensure a representative sample of NYS residents by age, race, and region across both sample sources. SSRS's Encipher Hybrid calibration methodology weights each respondent to correct for selection bias based on their sample source. Respondents were further weighted on several key indicators to calibrate results to definitive demographic sources in order to improve the generalizability of results to the residential adult population of New York State.

4 Significance testing was conducted by using Rao-Scott corrected Pearson chi-squares to determine whether difference between groups of interest were meaningful. Significance testing on the basis of gender excludes Transgender and Gender Non-Confirming (TGGNC) because the low number of respondents who identified as TGGNC. The same can be said of race, in so far that significance testing on the basis of race excludes respondents in the "Other" category due to low response rates.

**Figure 1. Type of employer-sponsored benefits**



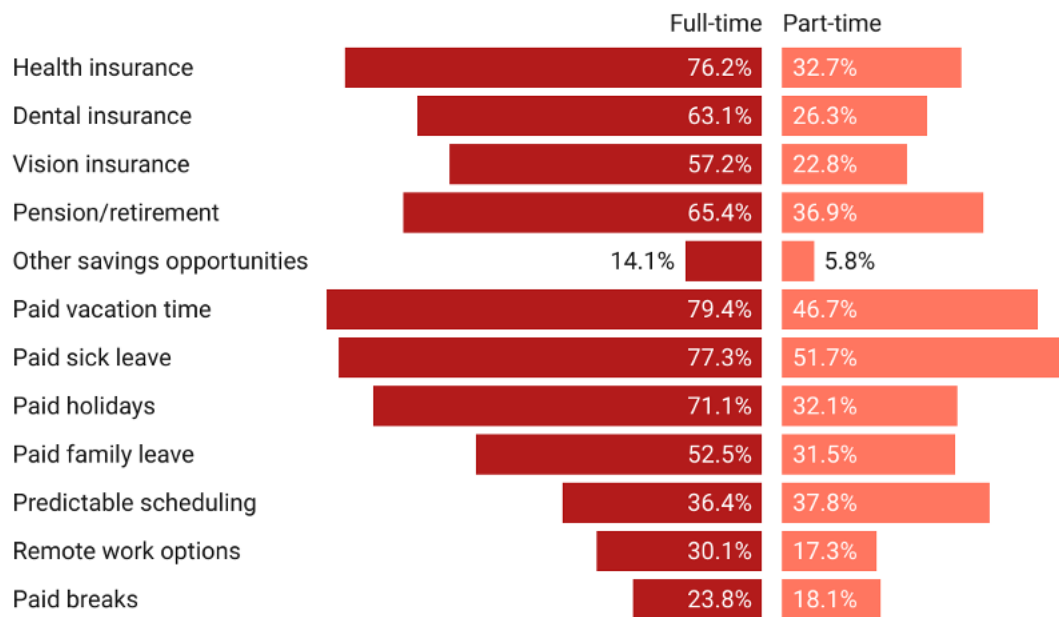
Respondents were asked "Which of the following benefits does your employer offer you?"

Universe: Respondents working for an employer. [n=1,304 weighted observations]

Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper

Respondents in full-time work—defined here as working in one job for 35 hours per week for pay, including self-employment—had higher rates of employer-sponsored benefits (see Figure 2). This included 77.3% of respondents who worked full-time were in receipt of sick leave compared to 51.7% of their part-time counterparts; 79.4% of respondents working full-time received paid vacation compared to 46.7% of part-time employees. A similar story for those who received paid federal holidays and paid family leave: 71% of full-time compared to 42.1% of part-time employees for the former benefit and 52.5% of full-time compared to 31.5% of part-time employees for the latter. Employer-sponsored health, dental and vision was similar where 76.2%, 63.1%, and 57.1%, respectively, of full-time employees had paid insurance compared to 32.7%, 26.3% and 22.8%, respectively, of part-time employees. Full-time employees were more likely to have employer-sponsored pension plans (65.4%) compared to part-time (36.9%).

**Figure 2. Receipt of employer-sponsored benefits full-time versus part-time employment**



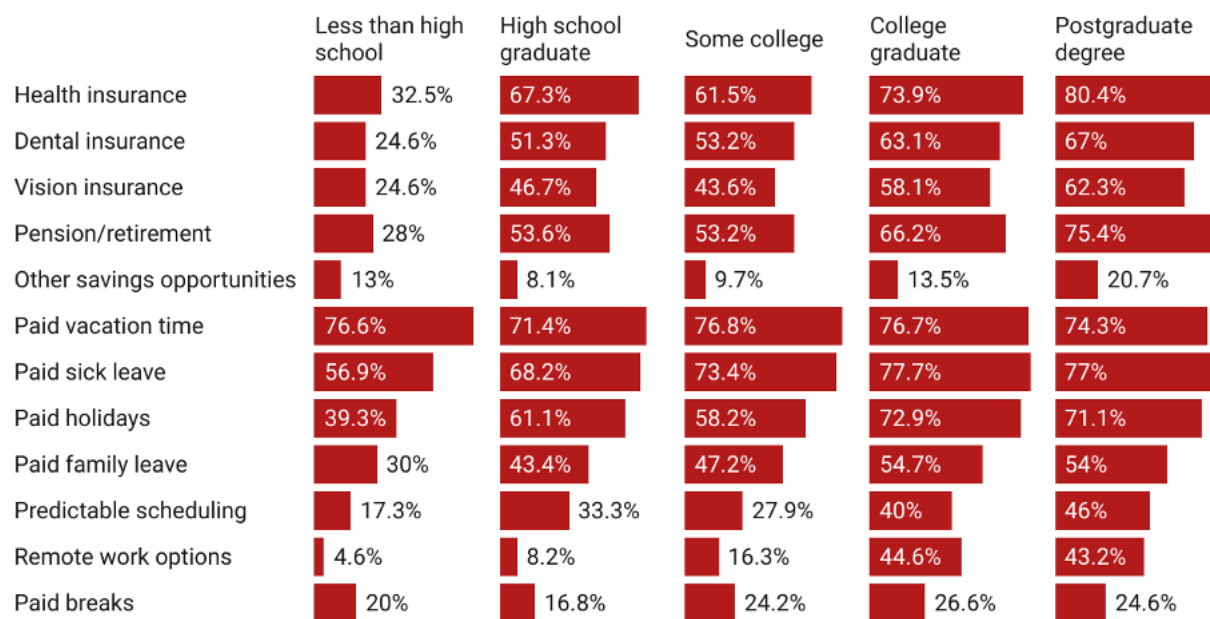
*Universe: Respondents working for an employer [n=1,304 weighted observations]*

*Subsamples: Full-time [n=1,122], Part-time [n=182]*

Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper

We then explored the relationship between receipt of benefits and education level (see Figure 3). Here we found an unsurprising relationship, namely those with higher levels of education had employment that offered more employer-sponsored benefits. Across all categories of benefits in Figure 3, respondents who indicated that they have a college or post-graduate degree were much more likely than those with less than a high school degree, a high school degree or even some college to have employer-sponsored benefits. Of note, those with less than high school degree (17.3%), a high school degree (33.3%) and some college (27.9%) have less predictable scheduling than those with a college (40%) or post-graduate degree (46%). The difference is also striking for those with remote work options, where those with less than some college having considerably less remote work options than those with a college degree or higher.

**Figure 3. Relationship between education level and receipt of employer-sponsored benefits**



Respondents were asked "Which of the following benefits does your employer offer you?"

Universe: Respondents working for an employer [n=1,304]

Subsample sizes: Less than high school [n=33], High school graduate [n=332], Some college [n=261],

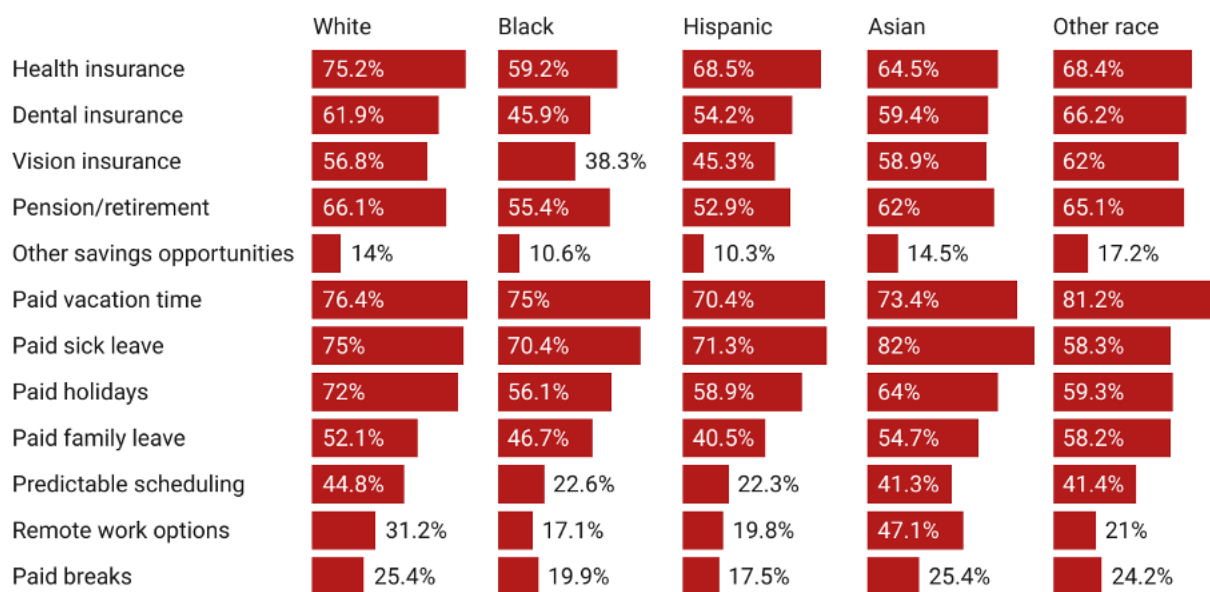
College graduate [n=388], Postgraduate degree [n=290]

Chart: CAROW • Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper

The structural inequalities embedded in the labor market were revealed when we explored the relationship between race and ethnicity and receipt of employer-sponsored benefits. Differences though were not statistically significant between the number of men and the number of women who had recourse to employer-sponsored benefits. Respondents who were employed and in receipt of employer-sponsored benefits at the time of taking the poll were pretty evenly split between men and women.

With race and ethnicity, the findings suggested something altogether different (see Figure 4). Here analysis of the Empire State Poll found a statistically significant relationship between respondents who identified as white (72%) having higher rates of paid holidays than respondents who identified as Black (56.1%) and Hispanic (59%). White respondents had higher rates of health (75.2%) and dental (61.9%) insurance compared to Black respondents (59.1% and 45.8% respectively). Respondents who identified as White (56.8%) also had higher rates of vision insurance compared to Black (38.3%) and Hispanic (45.3%). Respondents who identified as Asian (58.9%) had higher rates of vision insurance compared to Black respondents and marginally higher compared to Hispanic respondents. With pension/retirement plans, again white respondents (66.1%) had higher rates of an employer-sponsored pension plan compared to Black (55.4%) and Hispanic (52.9%) respondents. When asked about remote work options as a benefit provided by an employer, here respondents who identified as Asian (47.1%) had far higher remote work options compared to respondents who identified as white (31.1%) and together, these two groups had higher remote work options compared to respondents who identified as Black (22.6%) and Hispanic (19.8%). Unpredictable scheduling is an indicator of precarity in the workplace. Here we found that those respondents who identified as white (44.8%) and Asian (41.3%) had higher rates of predictable work schedules compared to those who identified as Black (22.6%) and Hispanic (22.3%).

**Figure 4. Employer-sponsored benefits by race and ethnicity**



Respondents were asked "Which of the following benefits does your employer offer you?"

Universe: Respondents working for an employer [n=1,304 weighted observations]

Subsamples: White [n=653], Black [n=181], Hispanic [n=265], Asian [n=150], Other race [n=55]

Chart: CAROW • Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper

## UNIONIZATION

Support for unions remains strong with 68.5% of Empire State Poll respondents approving of labor unions as opposed to 12% who disapproved (22% did not know). There is a statistically significant relationship between support for labor unions and race (see Appendix, Table 4). Here we found that respondents who identified as Black or African American supported labor unions more (75%) compared to those respondents who identified as white (65.6%), Hispanic (61%) or Asian (61.3%).<sup>5</sup> This finding is not surprising given the important role labor unions have played in significantly reducing economic disparities between Black and white workers. Specifically, racial wage gaps and racial wealth gaps are smaller among union members.<sup>6</sup> The collective bargaining agreement has been an important mechanism that has increased progress towards racial equity over time.

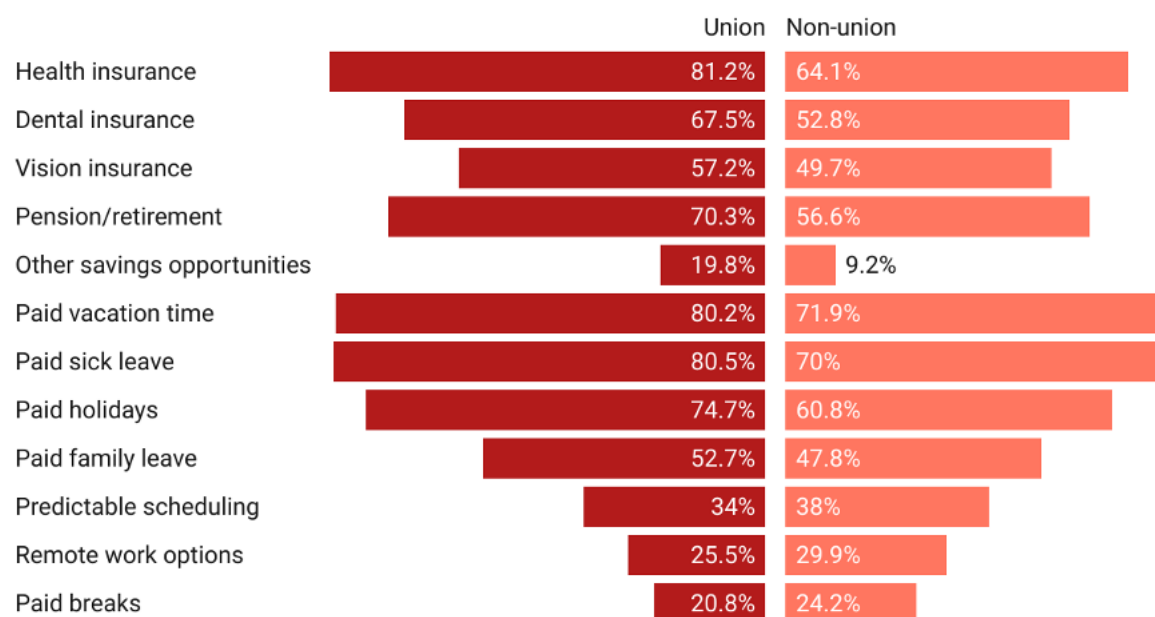
We proceeded to analyze the relationship between union membership and receipt of employer-sponsored benefits and found that union membership makes a difference across all benefit categories (see Figure 5). Respondents who were union members reported higher receipt of all benefits—paid sick leave (80.5%), paid vacation (80.1%), paid federal holidays (74.7%), health insurance (81.2%), dental insurance (67.5%), vision insurance (57.2%), employer-sponsored retirement or pension (70.3%) and other savings opportunities (70.3%). Paid family leave was the only benefit that was not statistically significant.

**Figure 5. Receipt of employer-sponsored benefits by union versus non-union membership**

<sup>5</sup> By gender, we found that the rates of approval were similar between men (66.9%) and women (64.8%).

<sup>6</sup> Bivens, J., McNicholas, C., Moore, K. and Poydock, M. (2023). Unions promote racial equity. Economic Policy Institute Fact Sheet. Economic Policy Institute: Washington, DC.

We then asked all respondents if they believed there should be stronger penalties in New York for employers



*Universe: Respondents working for an employer [n=1,304 observations]*

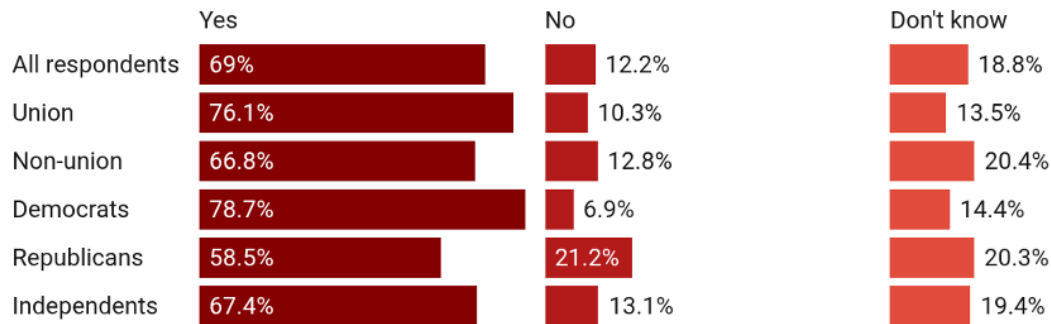
*Subsamples: Union [n=460], Non-union [n=845]*

Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper

who violate workers' right to join a labor union through fear of termination or any other form of retaliation from their employer (see Figure 6). Here 69% of respondents felt there should be stronger penalties, while only 12.2% of respondents indicated that there should not be. When disaggregating the data, respondents who are union members had higher levels of support for stronger penalties for employers who violate workers' right to join a union (76.1%) compared to non-union members (66.8%) while respondents who identified as Democrat had higher levels of support (78.7%) compared to respondents who identified as Republican (58.5%) and somewhat less support from those who identified as an Independent (67.4%).

**Figure 6. Stronger penalties for employers violating workers' right to unionize by union membership**

## and political party affiliation



Universe: All ESP respondents [n=2,683 weighted observations]

Subsamples: Union [n=614], Non-union [n=2,067], Democrats [n=950], Republicans [n=544], Independents [n=932]

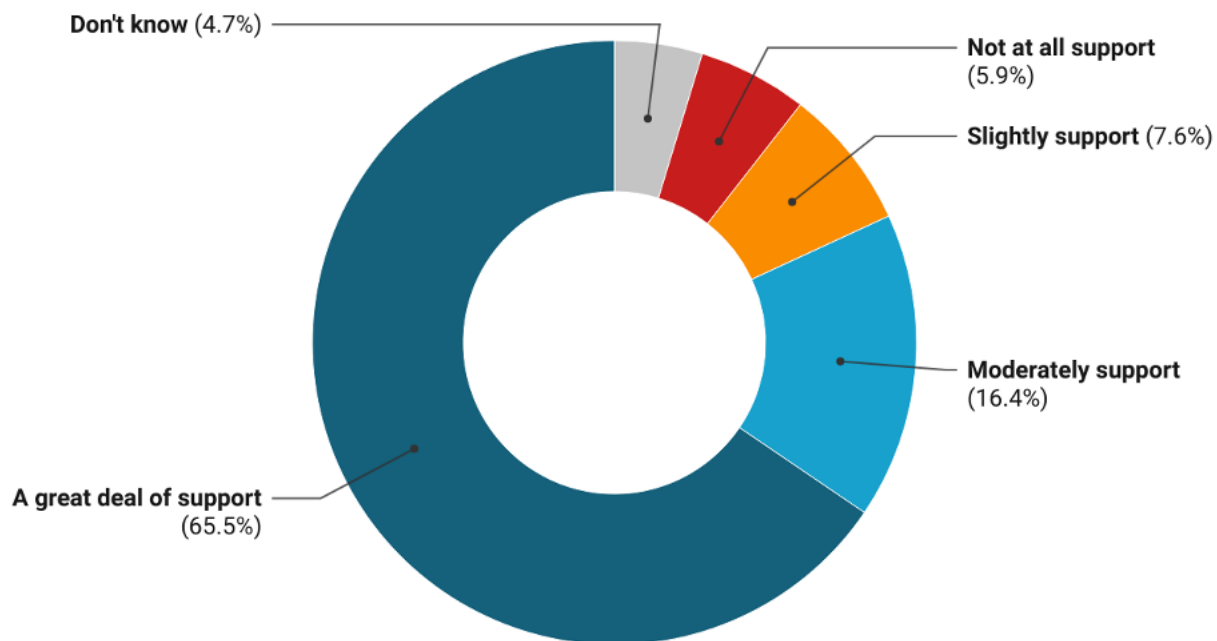
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## PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL AND LABOR PROTECTIONS

Our next set of questions asked respondents for their perceptions of state legislation that mandates every employer in New York State provide and pay for their full-time employees to have full health insurance (see Figure 7). In the aggregate, 81.8% of respondents supported employer-paid full health insurance for full-time employees. This compared to 13.4% who did not. That an overwhelming percentage of respondents agreed is impressive, but there are interesting differences by race/ethnicity, gender, whether a respondent belongs to a union, individual earnings and political party affiliation. Here we found that respondents who indicated “a great deal of support” and identified as a woman supported this statement more (70%) than those who identified as a man (60.4%). Respondents who identified as white (59.9%) had the lowest level of support compared to respondents who identified as Black or African American (77.3%), Hispanic (69.3%) and Asian (72.6%). Respondents who are union members had higher rates of “a great deal of support” at 72.7% compared to non-union members at 63.3%. Respondents earning \$99,000.00 or less were somewhat more likely to support this statement (67%) compared to respondents earning \$100,000.00 or more (58%). And finally, respondents who identified as Republican (54.8%) were less likely to express a “great deal of support” compared to respondents who identified as Democrat (77.5%) and as Independents (59.8%).



**Figure 7. Support state legislation that mandates employer provide full-time employees full healthcare insurance**



*Respondents were asked "To what extent would you support legislation that mandates that every employer in New York State provides and pays for their full-time employees to have full healthcare insurance?"*

*Universe: All respondents [n=2,684 weighted observations]*

*Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper*

We also asked respondents the extent to which they believe the following employment protections for workers in New York State should be strengthened: Protection from employer retaliation for employees who raise concerns about workplace issues; protection from wage theft; and protection from discrimination; and protection from workplace harassment. Across all four areas, respondents overwhelmingly supported these protections. There were some noteworthy differences depending on one's race/ethnicity, gender, political party affiliation and income. Respondents who identified as Democrats (70.3%) indicated greater support than those who identified as Republicans (48.4%) or Independents (56.1%). Of the four types of protections, all respondents—irrespective of their party affiliation—supported protection against workplace retaliation and wage theft more so than protection against workplace discrimination or workplace harassment. Respondents who identified as Black or African American indicated a higher level of supports across all four protections compared to any other racial or ethnic group, while respondents who identified as women supported protections against workplace discrimination more than respondents who identified as men. There was otherwise no statistically significant difference between men and women across the other three protections. Respondents with low levels of income were more supportive of protections against wage theft, workplace harassment and workplace discrimination. An average of responses to protection against wage theft, workplace harassment and discrimination found that respondents with incomes below \$30,000.00 per annum had the highest level of support (64.6%) with support diminishing as incomes increased, where an average of responses to the three protections indicated that only 35% of respondents earning \$200,000.00 were supportive of such workplace protections.



We then asked respondents which of the following—raising wages or salaries, adding or improving employer health benefits, pension or retirement savings, ending unfair treatment by managers, preventing discrimination, enhancing safety and health on the job, or improving access to affordable and quality child care—was the most important issue the respondent would like to see addressed in their workplace. Raising wages and salaries by far outpaced the other issues where 51.6% of respondents wanted to see wages and salaries increased. But there were some statistically significant differences that are of interest. Respondents who identified as Black or African American selected preventing discrimination at higher rates compared to other groups, while Hispanic respondents selected childcare access at higher rates compared to other groups. Differences by union member affiliation are statistically significant, where union members had lower rates of selecting raising wages and salaries which could be due to already having better wages and salaries negotiated on their behalf by their union compared to non-union respondents. In turn, union members selected implementing or upgrading pensions or retirement plans as well as improving access to affordable, quality childcare at higher rates compared to non-union members. Differences by gender were not statistically significant.

Finally, we asked whether respondents think New York State should raise its minimum wage to at least \$26.00 per hour to reflect current cost of living. Here 62.4% of respondents said yes, while 37.6% said no. Differences by gender were statistically significant where respondents who identified as women had higher support (70.5%) for raising the minimum wage to at least \$26.00 compared to men (29.5%). Differences by race were statistically significant, where respondents who identified as Black or African American and Hispanic had higher levels of support (87.6% and 81.8%, respectively) compared to white (48.6%) and Asian (65.3%) respondents. Differences by political party affiliation were also statistically significant where respondents who identified as Democrat had higher levels of support (69.8%) compared to respondents who identified as Republican (55%) and Independent (65.6%). When we asked respondents if they think lawmakers should ensure New York State has one minimum wage statewide, 64.5% of respondents said yes and 35.5% said no.

## IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

The findings reported in this brief are in many ways not surprising. They mirror long-standing trends in the labor market that have emerged in the last decades. To start, the relationship between education and earnings and receipt of employer-sponsored benefits remains strong. As indicated in Figure 3 and in the Appendix, Table 2, those with a college or post-graduate degree earn more and are more likely to have a range of employer-sponsored benefits. In contrast, those who have some college, a high school degree or less are more likely to be in low-wage work, have fewer (if any) employer-sponsored benefits and are more likely to have unpredictable work schedules. A picture of the outcome of decades-long structural racism in the labor market emerges. Respondents who identify as Black or African American and to a lesser extent as Hispanic are still more likely to be in low-wage work (see Appendix, Table 2) with fewer employer-sponsored benefits and in jobs with unpredictable schedules (see Figure 4).

Predictability as an indicator of precarity in work matters because when a job has an unpredictable schedule, it means that one's hours per week are not defined, which can result in large wage fluctuations from week to week. Someone may work 40 hours one week and then 10 hours the next week, for example. If an employee's schedule is posted, say, every two weeks, and every two weeks the days and number of hours worked change, it can then be very hard to plan for childcare, doctor appointments, family events, and much more. Unpredictability generally, but especially in low-wage jobs, inserts financial insecurity and general instability into a household.

But we also found that support for labor unions remains high. Moreover, unions clearly matter. The union difference is clear in that respondents who are union members have higher wages (see Appendix, Table 3) and more access to a range of employer-sponsored benefits, including more predictable scheduling (see Figure 5). Union members are also more likely to support state legislation that mandates stronger penalties in New York

for employers who violate workers' right to join a labor union through fear of termination, and support state legislation that would mandate every employer in New York State provide and pay for their full-time employees to have full health insurance.

An interesting finding emerged when respondents were asked whether protection from employer retaliation for employees who raise concerns about workplace issues, protection from wage theft, protection from discrimination, and protection from workplace harassment should be strengthened. While respondents overwhelmingly supported such protections, of the four types of protections, respondents overall —irrespective of their political party affiliation—supported protection against workplace retaliation and wage theft more so than protection against workplace discrimination or workplace harassment. However, respondents who identified as Black or African American and as women, prioritized protection against discrimination or harassment. That respondents overwhelmingly supported protection from wage theft and employer retaliation when raising concerns about the workplace more than protection against harassment and discrimination tracks with the literature about priorities by unions in organizing campaigns. Evidence shows that, in the context of union organizing specifically, the tendency has been to focus on the “bread and butter” issues like wages and benefits that are applicable to all members over issues like harassment and discrimination that have been viewed in the past as relevant to some, but not all members.<sup>7</sup> Though these factors are union-specific, it still reflects a larger cultural and institutional problem that may have influenced why survey respondents across political party affiliations prioritize economic protections over harassment and discrimination protections.

## LOOKING AHEAD

Our attitudinal questions indicate that respondents overwhelmingly want labor and social protections. They want labor protections against wage theft, retaliation, harassment and discrimination. They want to be able to form a union free from retaliation. They want full health insurance paid for by an employer. It is important that legislation (with corresponding enforcement mechanisms) be enacted to address these needs. Moreover, further actions are needed to ensure that low-wage workers have access to important employer-sponsored benefits and that pathways to opportunity through education and training are available to everyone—especially those historically disadvantaged in the labor market on account of their race or ethnicity.

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<sup>7</sup> Crain, M. and Ken Matheny (2019). Sexual Harassment and Solidarity. *The Georgetown Law Review*, 87(1),56-122. See also Avendaño, A. (2018). Sexual Harassment in the Workplace: Where Were the Unions? *Labor Studies Journal*, 43(4), 245-262).

## APPENDIX

**Table 1. Individual income by education**

|              | Less than high school | High school graduate | Some college | College graduate | Post-graduate | Total |
|--------------|-----------------------|----------------------|--------------|------------------|---------------|-------|
| <\$30k       | 77.5%                 | 57%                  | 42.7%        | 20.7%            | 11.6%         | 39.1% |
| \$30-\$49k   | 11.5%                 | 21.6%                | 22.4%        | 16.2%            | 11.4%         | 18.3% |
| \$50-\$99k   | 8.6%                  | 17.2%                | 26.6%        | 38.6%            | 37.9%         | 27.1% |
| \$100-\$199k | 2.1%                  | 3.9%                 | 7.1%         | 19.2%            | 30%           | 12.4% |
| \$200k+      | 0.4%                  | 0.4%                 | 1.2%         | 5.3%             | 9.1%          | 3.1%  |

Differences in income by education are statistically significant ( $P \leq .0001$ )

Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper

**Table 2. Individual income by race/ethnicity**

|              | White | Black | Hispanic | Asian | Other | Total |
|--------------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|
| <\$30k       | 33.3% | 51%   | 49.9%    | 31.4% | 45.3% | 39.1% |
| \$30-\$49k   | 20.7% | 18.9% | 14.3%    | 11%   | 17.8% | 18.3% |
| \$50-\$99k   | 29.1% | 22.9% | 25.7%    | 26%   | 23%   | 27.1% |
| \$100-\$199k | 13.7% | 5%    | 8.6%     | 23.9% | 10.6% | 12.4% |
| \$200k+      | 3.2%  | 2.2%  | 1.4%     | 7.6%  | 3.3%  | 3.1%  |

Differences in income by race are statistically significant ( $P \leq .0001$ )

Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper

**Table 3. Individual income by union membership**

|              | Union | Non-Union | Total |
|--------------|-------|-----------|-------|
| <\$30k       | 17.3% | 45.6%     | 39.1% |
| \$30-\$49k   | 19%   | 18.1%     | 18.3% |
| \$50-\$99k   | 39.8% | 23.3%     | 27.1% |
| \$100-\$199k | 20.1% | 10.1%     | 12.4% |
| \$200k+      | 3.7%  | 3%        | 3.1%  |

Differences in income by union membership are statistically significant ( $P \leq .0001$ )

Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper

**Table 4. Union approval by race/ethnicity**

|             | White | Black | Hispanic | Asian | Other | Total |
|-------------|-------|-------|----------|-------|-------|-------|
| Approve     | 65.6% | 75%   | 61%      | 60.3% | 70.5% | 65.8% |
| Disapprove  | 15.4% | 4.3%  | 8.3%     | 14.1% | 7.3%  | 12.1% |
| Do not know | 18.9% | 20.7% | 30.7%    | 25.6% | 22.2% | 22%   |

*Differences in union approval by race are statistically significant ( $P \leq .0001$ )*

Source: 2024 Cornell University ILR Empire State Poll • Created with Datawrapper