

# Jewish Labor Committee

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חנוכה

## 5769/2008 Festival of Lights and Rights

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Chanukah, the Festival of Lights, is celebrated in commemoration of the re-dedication of the Second Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the Maccabees in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century BCE. It is also a time to re-dedicate the Jewish community to important worker justice issues by expressing support for **The Employee Free Choice Act**.

*"You shall not abuse a needy and destitute laborer, but you must pay him his wages on the same day, for he is needy and urgently depends on it" (Deuteronomy 24:14-15).*

*"Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests." –Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948*

The Jewish community has always been active in addressing the needs of the increasing number of Americans that are falling behind. Wages are stagnant, healthcare costs are rising and inequality is growing. Most of these new poor are working parents stuck in low-wage jobs, as evidenced by the fact that the percentage of poor children with a parent working full-time year round has grown by 60 percent since 1992.

The primary cause of increasing poverty is the deterioration of labor rights and collective bargaining in America. Fewer and fewer jobs provide any type of healthcare coverage or pension and one-quarter of all American jobs do not pay enough to support a family of four above the poverty line. It is not in our national interest or consistent with our Jewish values that working people be trapped in a cycle of poverty.

Unions have historically been a way for workers to bargain collectively on behalf of a fairer economy that shares its prosperity more equally. One of the reasons that so many workers who want unions have failed to unionize, is the deterioration of legal protections for workers, lack of enforcement by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) and employer tactics that, often illegally, discourage union formation. In fact, the NLRB has documented more than 31,000 workers who were fired or penalized for union activity in 2005.

For workers who decide to unionize, the current law is stacked against them. Employers have no duty to accept union petitions and can legally employ tactics that indefinitely delay union formation. When workers do successfully unionize, in one-third of cases, employees never negotiate a contract. To address the lack of legal protections and law enforcement for workers who wish to unionize, Congress will be considering the Employee Free Choice Act (EFCA). This bill would amend the National Labor Relations Act of 1935, by requiring employees to recognize a union when a majority of workers sign cards authorizing union representation. EFCA would also strengthen penalties for companies that coerce or intimidate employees and it will establish binding arbitration mechanisms when employers and workers are unable to agree on a first contract.

EFCA is important because unions have proven to enhance the quality of life for employees. Unionized workers earn 29 percent more than their non-unionized counterparts, are 62 percent more likely to have employer-provided health coverage and four times more likely to have a pension plan. Unionized workers also help non-unionized workers by creating pressure for other employers to compete by offering higher wages and a better benefit package. Empowering unions to bargain for fairer wages and better benefits is not only a basic protection guaranteed by the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights, it is also a proven way to combat the increasing structural poverty in America. § § *Material sourced through Jewish Council for Public Affairs.*