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Los Angeles Black Worker Center

A New Sense of Power of the People: Fighting for Equity, Transparency, Accountability and Justice in the 21st Century Labor Market

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The UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education (Labor Center) has recently opened the Los Angeles Black Worker Center (BWC) in partnership with labor and community. The mission of the Los Angeles Black Worker Center is to change public policies and corporate practices in Los Angeles in order to advance economic justice for African American workers as well as the families and communities that rely on them. Our long-term goals are to dismantle the barriers of employment discrimination, create access to quality jobs, and transform low-paying, low-skilled jobs into fulfilling and sustaining careers and vocations through unionization and leadership development.

The Los Angeles Black Worker Center project grew out of a combination of seven years experience in low-wage worker organizing in South Los Angeles, developing leadership of black unionists in the African American Union Leadership School (AAULS) at the UCLA Labor Center, and the challenge to sustain progressive labor-community-university coalitions over the long term. Following a power analysis of black labor conditions in Los Angeles and a year-long civic engagement project for the 2008 general elections, the BWC project emerged to fill a long-standing void for workers, activists, and scholars focused on job creation and economic development in the black community in Los Angeles.

The LA BWC is a project of the UCLA Labor Center. The UCLA Labor Center's major accomplishments reflect our goals to address broad economic and social conditions of communities of color. The LA BWC works to build strategic coalitions that link together workers, the local community, unions, and students. The LA BWC will draw on its networks to support workers in the black community through education, training, research, and organizing. Given the approximately 8 million jobs lost during the longest and deepest recession since the Great Depression, it is more important now than ever that a resource exist for this community of workers struggling to find decent jobs.

The UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment supports faculty and graduate student research on employment and labor topics in a variety of academic disciplines.

The Institute also sponsors colloquia, conferences and other public programming, is home to the undergraduate minor in Labor and Workplace Studies at UCLA, and carries out educational outreach on workplace issues to constituencies outside the university.

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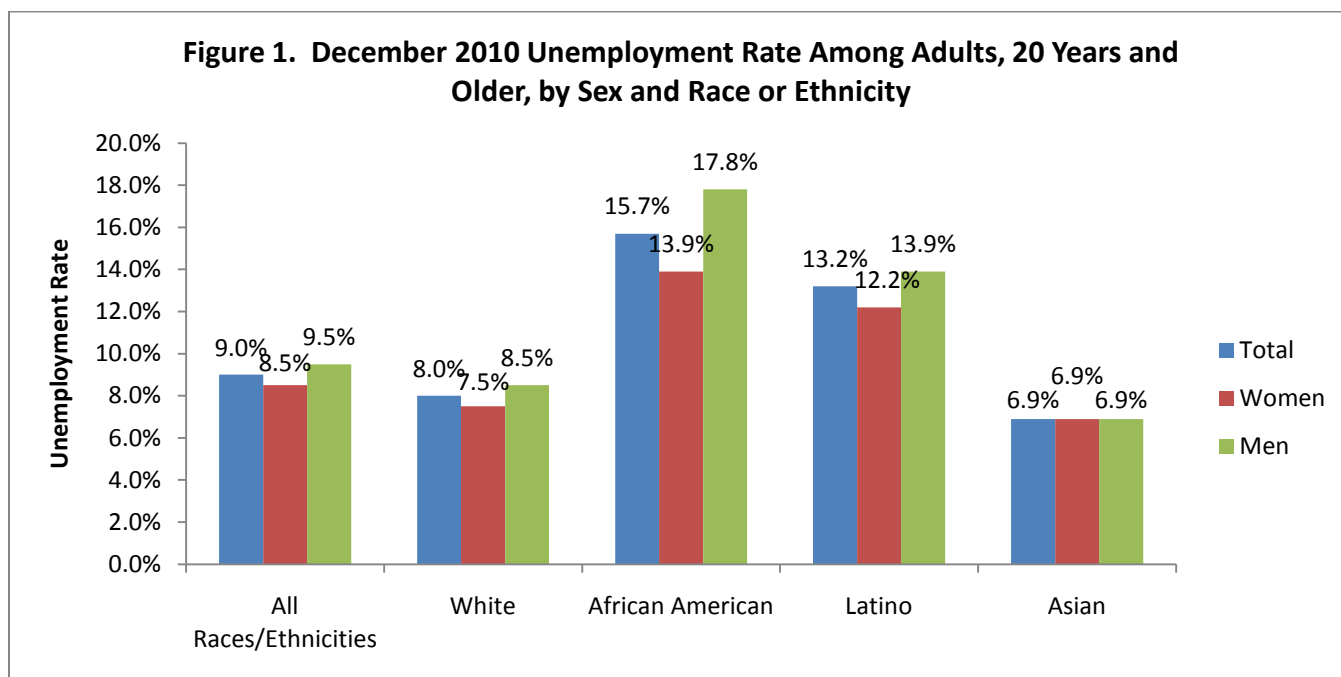
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Current Unemployment Situation – Differences by Group

Despite the official end of the recession in June 2009 – more than a year and a half ago, there are still nearly 14 million unemployed people in the United States and the overall unemployment rate remains at 9%. Looking more closely, it is clear that some groups of people are faring worse in this weak job market than are others. While the unemployment rate for white workers in January 2011 was 8%, 15.7% of the African American labor force was unemployed. At 17.8%, African American men had the highest unemployment rate of all workers (see Figure 1).



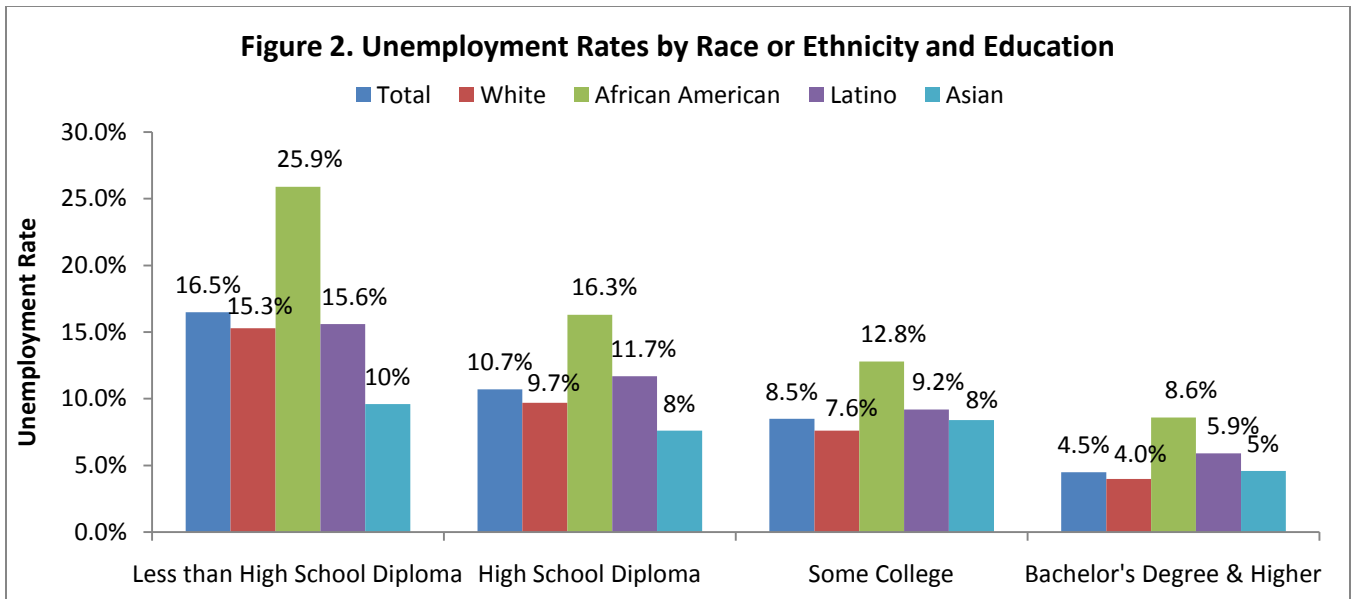
Source. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Note. Latino and Asian unemployment rates are not seasonally adjusted.

These group differences in rates of unemployment are evident even when looking within educational levels (see Figure 2). Regardless of educational level, African Americans have a higher rate of unemployment than all other racial and ethnic groups.

With more than a quarter of all youth between the ages of 16 and 19 years old currently unemployed, youth in general have had an extraordinarily difficult time finding work since the start of the recession. However, among young people, African American youth have had the toughest time finding a job. The unemployment rate for African American youth has risen from about 33% in December 2007, which was already unacceptably high, to over 45% in January 2011 (see Figure 3). If nothing changes, a generation of African Americans is going to lose touch with the working world.

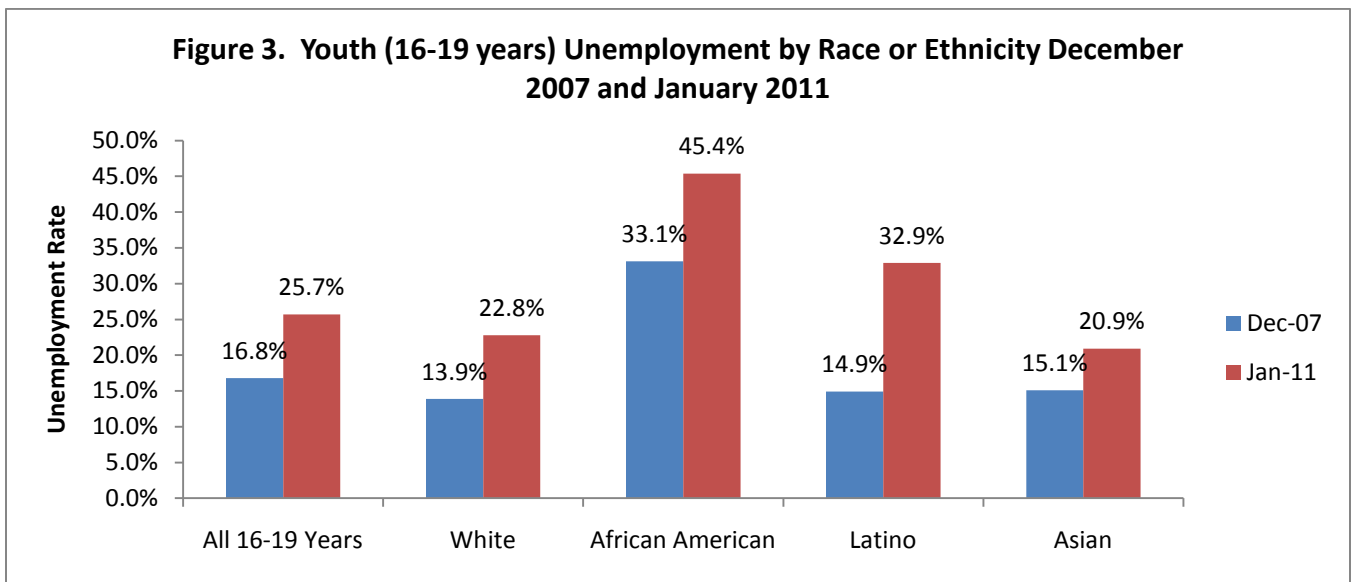
Figure 2. Unemployment Rates by Race or Ethnicity and Education



Source. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Note. Unemployment rates are not seasonally adjusted.

Figure 3. Youth (16-19 years) Unemployment by Race or Ethnicity December 2007 and January 2011

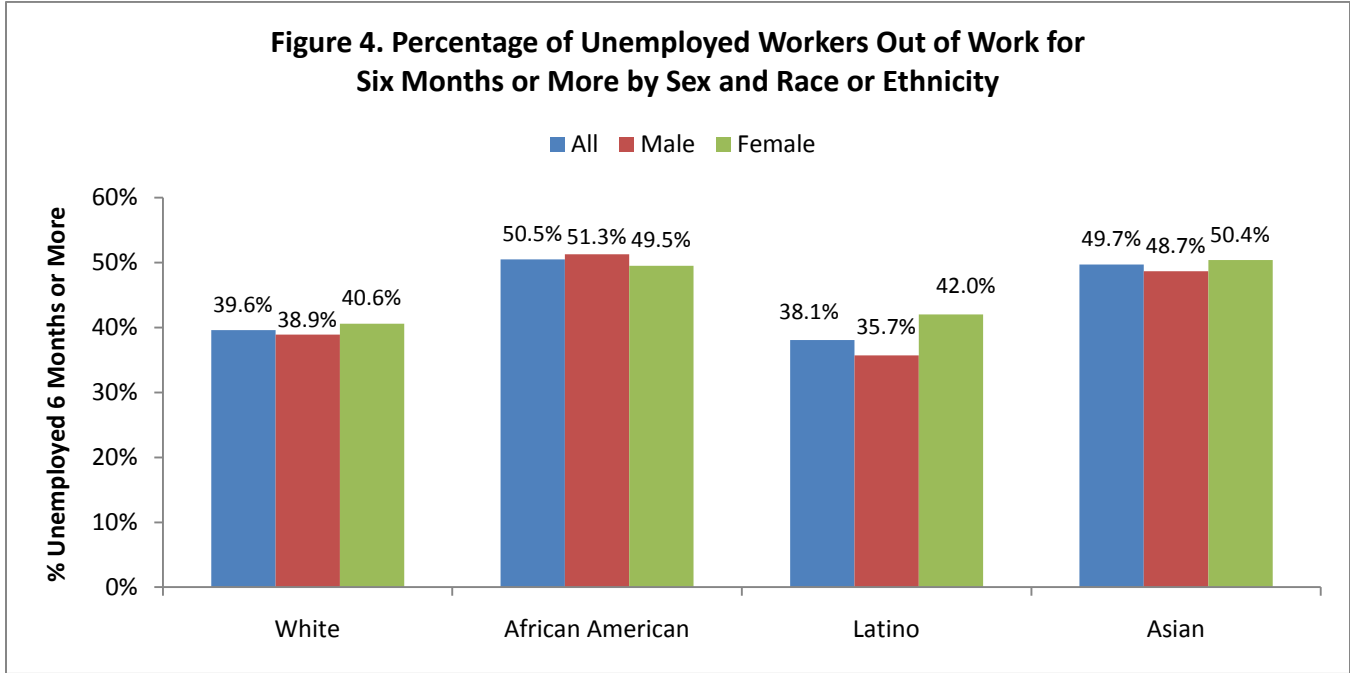


Source. Bureau of Labor Statistics

Note. Latino and Asian youth unemployment rates are not seasonally adjusted.

With the dearth of new jobs since the official end of the recession, these high levels of unemployment are likely to remain for many months or even years to come. The 36,000 jobs created in January 2011 do not even keep up with the natural growth in the working age population, let alone do anything to reduce the number of unemployed. In fact, the only thing seeming to reduce the ranks of the unemployed is discouragement. As people become discouraged and stop looking for work, they leave the labor force and are no longer counted among the unemployed. In January, there were one million discouraged workers.

Before dropping out of the labor force, many discouraged workers likely found themselves amongst the ranks of the long-term unemployed. Once unemployed, the average time needed to find a new job in January 2011 was 36.9 weeks, or about nine months. Compared to 41.5% in January 2010, nearly 44% of all unemployed workers in January 2011 had been out of work for six months or more. In addition, 29.4% of the unemployed have remained unemployed for a full year or more after losing their last job. Although almost 36% of unemployed male Latino workers are still unemployed after six months, Latino men actually have the lowest long-term unemployment rates of any of the groups examined. With almost 50% of Asian and almost 51% of African American unemployed workers not finding a job within six months, these two groups are experiencing the most long-term unemployment¹ (see Figure 4).



Source. Bureau of Labor Statistics²
 Note. Percentages rates are not seasonally adjusted.

This discrepancy in the unemployment rates for individuals from different groups is likely to only increase as the economy improves. Individuals out of work for shorter periods of time are more likely to be hired than those who have been out of work for longer stretches. People who have gone a long time without a job may not be up to date on the latest innovations in their field, they may have lost some of their connections to others within their field, and the gap on their resumes may lead to being stigmatized by potential employers. Thus, as the ranks of the long-term unemployed continue to grow, differences in unemployment rates between racial and ethnic groups are also likely to grow.

Impacts of Unemployment

Beyond well-established physical and mental-health consequences of unemployment such as cardiovascular problems, depression, anxiety, and suicide,³ there are economic repercussions of unemployment that go beyond the immediate reduction of income associated with the loss of a job. Workers who become employed during a recession earn less than those who begin a job during times of economic growth, whether they are new to the labor force or finding a job after a period of unemployment. Those who are out of work for long periods of time earn even less than those who face briefer stints of unemployment. This downward push on wages can take up to 15 to 20 years to be ameliorated.⁴

All unemployed workers face a difficult situation in what is thus far a jobless recovery. However, the situation many black workers face today is far worse. In July 2009, four focus groups conducted by the LA Black Worker Center were held with Church leaders, job training specialists, ex-offender and youth employment specialists, and workers. Focus group participants spoke openly and passionately about the lack of quality jobs in the African American community since manufacturing jobs left the region. The jobs in Los Angeles that remain and are available to black workers are often low-paying, demeaning, and tedious. In particular, young black men sometimes find it hard to stick with these jobs, especially when drug-dealing is available to them. Finding a better job, however, is fraught with difficulty – lack of transportation, poor access to training, network hiring, negative stereotyping, and even discriminatory union practices create major barriers to employment.

As well as the obstacles faced by black workers in finding quality employment, workers who have been unemployed for long periods of time face the possibility of stigmatization. This is true, even though employers may be aware that finding a job is very difficult during such a broad and deep economic downturn. Employers are less likely to hire those with a large gap on their resumes, because this could be an indication of everything from a loss of skills to a lack of commitment to work. There are still nearly five unemployed workers for every job, so employers can afford to be picky when making hiring decisions. As employers hire more of the recently unemployed, the percentage of the unemployed who have been out of work for a long time will continue to increase. This is likely to particularly affect the African American community, since a disproportionate number of African Americans are unemployed and have remained so for a long time. Intervention is needed to reconnect employers and the African American community, particularly men and young people, so that as jobs are created, this group of workers is able to benefit from an improving economy.

Discriminatory Practices and Employment

In addition to the problems caused by the stigmatization of the long-term unemployed, it is well known that blacks have been discriminated against in the job market. This has been particularly the case in the construction industry. While blacks currently comprise about 9% of the population in the Los Angeles metropolitan area⁵ and about 10% of new apprentices entering construction apprenticeship programs, they only represent 3% of the construction workforce. Discrimination in construction is particularly significant because of the size of the construction industry in California. Although construction jobs have decreased in California by more than one-third since the start of the recession, with 535,600 people working in construction in California, this industry is still a major employer in the state.⁶

As a result of a long history of discrimination, black workers are less likely to be hired in available construction positions today. The long history of discrimination against blacks in the construction industry has reduced the number of current black union members. Since many jobs are gotten through informal networks and unions are largely invested in the continued employment of their current membership, the cycle of discrimination in the hiring of black workers is likely to be continued. Furthermore, discrimination does not end with hiring decisions. On-site discrimination is a common complaint of black workers who manage to find construction jobs.

Thus, discrimination, exploitation, and a lack of access to quality jobs for African American workers have deepened the current crisis. Race remains a serious obstacle for African Americans in the job market and in the workplace. A study of employment discrimination law enforcement in California found that the rate of complaints from black workers to the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) was nearly twice that of any other group.⁷ Discrimination against black workers, particularly black men in job hiring is well-documented and especially egregious against the formerly incarcerated.⁸ The exploitation that black employees face in the workplace highlights the need for access to quality, union jobs.

Worker Centers Can Help

Worker centers began to appear on the American landscape in the early 1990s. In 1992 there were only five centers in the U.S., but by 2005, this number had grown to 139 centers in 32 states across the country. Worker centers function somewhat differently from other organizations and agencies designed to aid workers. For one, they tend to focus on workers in a particular geographic region rather than on workers in a given job site or industry. Worker centers do not directly help workers find jobs. Rather, they try to respond to other issues faced by low-wage workers. In particular, they work to reduce the barriers to employment, particularly those created by discriminatory practices, increase fairness in hiring, and improve working conditions on the job. All of these issues are addressed through a strong focus on education and leadership development. Many worker centers require workers to participate in workshops, courses, and training sessions and encourage workers to develop leadership skills which can be applied both to the workplace and to organizing in the community.⁹

Worker centers initially opened largely to aid immigrant workers and this is still the focus of the vast majority of worker centers. The UCLA BWC will be one of only a few centers in the entire country that primarily serve the needs of black workers. Other black worker centers are located in the South, where unions are weak. Thus, even among black worker centers, the UCLA Labor Center's BWC is unique in its ability to work with a strong and progressive labor movement in an effort to improve the both the short and long-term job situation of blacks in the area. The relationship between the BWC and Los Angeles area unions will allow for a host of programs that will begin to counter generations of discrimination both in terms of securing employment and at the job site.

Regardless of target group, most worker centers have in common a focus on service, advocacy, and organizing. Through this tripartite system of functions, worker centers are able to help to remove barriers to employment, and work to improve the pay, benefits, and working conditions of jobs that employ low-income workers. Services such as legal assistance, health care referrals, and connecting workers with other agencies are important functions of worker centers. Worker centers may strive to educate workers and teach leadership skills as well as fight to reduce discrimination. Advocacy work such as legal assistance and advocating for changes in public policy can help to reduce discriminatory hiring practices. Organizing workers can increase employers' compliance with current laws and help to pass new laws that will improve working conditions at the job site. Advocacy and organizing helps workers to achieve reforms through direct action, such as boycotts, pickets, or even strikes, and by building political and community support. In some cases, this action has resulted in increased wages, receipt of back wages, and improved working conditions.¹⁰

The Los Angeles Black Worker Center has Powerful Ideas for Addressing the Black Jobs Crisis

Even among the few worker centers in the country that primarily serve black communities, the Los Angeles Black Worker Center is unique in that it is located in an area with a strong union presence and that it is affiliated with a major university. Through its relationship with UCLA, the BWC is able to be a resource for research that may be used by organizations across the U.S. in developing movements that fight to improve the conditions of black workers. Working together with unions and other community organizations, the BWC is creating a coordinated response to the interconnected problems faced by the black community in Los Angeles. The policies developed by the BWC will help to create equity in the labor market, as well as on the job, and to improve the quality of jobs available to low-income black workers. The BWC will serve as a model for centers being developed in other urban black communities facing similar economic and social crises.

Although the Black Worker Center has just officially opened its doors, it has already been working to help improve the jobs and job outlook for black workers in Los Angeles. The BWC programs all work to address the problem of labor inequality for blacks in Los Angeles through a focus on leadership development, coalition building and advocacy, and research and communication. Through Black Workers In Green (BLING), the BWC has

partnered with construction trades leaders to help young black workers find a way into unionized construction jobs. BLING focuses on workers who are 16-25 years old and helps them to develop social networks and skills through pre-apprenticeship training, community building, mediation, and mentorship.

The Black Labor Construction Council (BLCC) works to fight discrimination and improve working conditions by facilitating and creating a safe space for black construction workers to discuss the inequitable working conditions they may have experienced. Discussions will aim to develop strategies to encourage the recruitment and retention of black workers in unionized construction positions and to mitigate inequities experienced by black workers on the job. The BLCC supports the use of project labor agreements with local hire and will collaborate with the community to ensure that PLAs are followed. The BLCC will help to develop leaders who can advocate for the demands of black workers.

With its partner Legal Aid Foundation-Los Angeles, the BWC has created a Legal Advisory Committee (LAC), whose members will donate their time, resources, support, and advice to help support black workers in fighting workplace abuse and employment discrimination. The LAC will launch pro-bono services in specific cases through one-on-one consultations. In addition, it will develop a curriculum to teach workers about their rights and provide them with the information they will need to address race discrimination in the work place as well as other work place issues such as wage theft, unemployment benefits, and worker's compensation. Workers will have access to this information through a monthly legal clinic, which begins later this year.

Given the multiple and inter-locking problems faced by black workers, there is a need for a coordinated response that brings all the key actors and organizations together. Since the EEOC has not been an effective recourse for black workers, a better legal strategy is needed to address discriminatory practices. Better and more coordinated research is needed to develop an accurate picture of what is happening in the black community. Unions, which help ensure that jobs pay a livable wage and provide benefits, need to contribute to the process of guaranteeing that black workers are included in the recruitment process. Mentoring must be more widely available to help workers hold on to jobs. Political education is needed to help black workers build unions at their workplaces, understand the connection between racism and labor exploitation, and transcend the artificial division between the Latino and black community. Organizing is also needed to increase black worker presence in and to expand pipelines of opportunity for quality jobs. Through its outreach to the community and unions and its ongoing programs, the Los Angeles Black Worker Center will provide this much needed coordinated response.

Conclusion

Worker centers have mainly been established to serve the needs of immigrants in a particular geographic area. Thus, public policy changes have largely been directed toward the rights of immigrant workers. However, the history of racism in America, the high rate of unemployment that existed prior to the economic downturn, but that has exploded in the black community since the start of the Great Recession, and the associated problem of long-term unemployment in the black community demonstrate a need for worker centers that will serve the black community. It is in this context that the UCLA Labor Center has opened up the Black Worker Center in Los Angeles. The Black Worker Center will provide a much needed resource in the Los Angeles black community. The service, advocacy, and organizing spearheaded by the Los Angeles Black Worker Center will be part of a permanent solution to the jobs crisis in the black community.

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