



The union label is becoming tattered INFO ON UNIONS VIRGINIA'S BIGGEST RIGHT TO WORK

Union membership slips in Virginia

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Just 3.7 percent of Virginia's wage and salary workers were union members in 2007, placing the state next-to-lowest in the U.S. in that category.

The number of Virginia workers who belonged to a union declined 10,000 to 129,000 last year, according to a recent news release from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. An additional 38,000 workers were represented by a union at their main job but were not union members themselves.

At 3 percent, North Carolina had the lowest union membership rate in the U.S. last year. Membership in South Carolina, Georgia and Texas also was less than 5 percent. New York had the highest membership rate at 25.2 percent.

AFL-CIO Virginia President Jim Leamon attributed much of last year's decline in Virginia to the closing of the Ford plant in Norfolk and general downsizing in the auto industry.

But declining union rates in Virginia--and the U.S. as a whole--are not a new thing. In 1992, Virginia's union membership rate was 9.3 percent.

Leamon said long-term declines are due to the fact that manufacturing jobs--which are often heavily unionized--are leaving Virginia. Many new jobs have been in technology and defense in Northern Virginia; those sectors don't have a heavy union presence.

"It's a trend that's been going on for many years," said Keith Cheatham, vice president of government affairs for the Virginia Chamber of Commerce.

Virginia is one of 22 "right-to-work" states. Workers in these states cannot be compelled, as a condition of employment, to join a labor union or pay dues. The country's right-to-work states are clustered in the Southeast and Midwest.

Cheatham said the state's right-to-work status is a selling point for companies looking to locate here. Forbes magazine has named Virginia the country's best state for business in each of the past two years. The next three states on the 2007 Forbes list--Utah, North Carolina and Texas--also are right-to-work states.

Cheatham added that the state's low unemployment rate and good wages have made it hard for unions.

"When you have a diverse economy that seemingly is doing pretty well, it's a tough sell," Cheatham said. "It's not a very exciting place for labor unions, which is fine for us."

In addition, Virginia and North Carolina are the only two states in which public-sector employees can't collectively bargain, although they can unionize.

Leamon said the scales are tipped in Virginia in favor of business and management. It would take an act of the General Assembly to change Virginia's status as a right-to-work state, but that's not something the AFL-CIO is lobbying for. It's focusing on benefiting union members and nonmembers through worker compensation, labor, unemployment and other laws.

"It's very hard to organize [in Virginia]," Leamon said.

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The 22 right-to-work states: Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia and Wyoming.

The state's top five unions are the United Steelworkers of America, Communication Workers of America, United Food and Commercial Workers, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers and American Federation of Teachers, said AFL-CIO Virginia President Jim Leamon.