



Unionization Climbs for Two Straight Years, but Remains a Fraction of 1980s Rates

Workers Want Unions, but Significant Growth Will Require Legislation



SOURCE: AP/Stephen Brashear

Boeing Machinists union members count ballots after voting on a new contract offered by the company.

By **David Madland, Karla Walter** | January 28, 2009

The number of American workers belonging to a labor union increased for the second year in row—and is now up to 12.4 percent. Prior to 2007, union membership rates had not increased in the last quarter century and the current union membership rates are still a fraction of what they were in the early 1980s. This second year of growth demonstrates an intense desire among Americans to become unionized, but significant legislative changes must occur in order for a substantial portion of the American workforce to get back onto union rolls.

American unionization rates grew from 12.1 percent to 12.4 percent in 2008 after growing from 12 percent to 12.1 percent in 2007. This small increase is unfortunately dwarfed by years of declining union membership rates that have weakened Americans' economic well-being. Unionization rates have fallen by 4 percentage points since 2000, when the union membership rate was 13.4 percent, and by almost 8 percentage points since 1983, the first year comparable union data are available, when union membership rates were 20.1 percent in 1983.

Declining unionization rates destabilize working families and decrease their wages. Even today, union workers **earn significantly more** on average than non-union counterparts and union employers are more likely to provide benefits. Years of declining unionization mean workers are not being rewarded for their hard work and are less likely to receive important employer benefits. Most Americans say they would join a union if they could, but the current union selection process is broken, exposing workers to the aggressive tactics of antiunion employers and endangering workplace democracy. It will take substantial legislative changes to allow all Americans a stronger voice on the job and a true opportunity to unionize.

The Employee Free Choice Act is the first step toward restoring workers' basic democratic right to make a free choice to join a union, and this legislation is likely to be one of the most important issues debated during President Obama's first year in office. It would reform the labor relations system through provisions that grant workers a fair and direct path to join unions through a majority sign-up process, employ stiffer penalties on employers who break the rules, and use a first contract mediation and arbitration process to thwart bad-faith bargaining. Passing the bill would help restore workplace democracy for workers attempting to organize, boost unionization rates, and improve the economic standing and workplace conditions for millions of American workers.

The geography of union growth

Just over half of states have experienced union growth over the last year, but most states are still "in the hole" when it comes to long-term union growth.

Unionization growth since 2000 is concentrated in New England and the western United States. Union membership rates grew over the past eight years in Alabama (9.6 to 9.8 percent), Alaska (21.6 to 23.5 percent), Arizona (6.6 to 8.8 percent), Arkansas (5.8 to 5.9 percent), California (15.5 to 18.4 percent), Connecticut (16.4 to 16.9 percent), Delaware (12.8 to 13.4 percent), Massachusetts (14.2 to 15.7 percent), New Hampshire (10.2 to 10.6 percent), Oregon (15.7 to 16.6 percent), and Washington (17.9 to 19.8 percent).

Unionization rates slid in the rest of the states, particularly the rust belt states. Union membership rates since 2000 declined in Illinois (18.3 to 16.6 percent), Indiana (15.4 to 12.4 percent), Michigan (20.3 to 18.8 percent), Ohio (17.4 to 14.2 percent), Pennsylvania (16.9 to 15.4 percent), and Wisconsin (17.8 to 15 percent). Manufacturing was once a highly unionized employment sector, but these workers are now less likely to be unionized (11.4 percent) than the average American worker.

The most rapid expansion of union membership nationwide has been in the public sector, where workers often face few barriers to unionization. Private sector employers often seek to influence workers' votes during **expensive antiunion campaigns** with threats, one-on-one pressure, mandatory meetings, and often illegal tactics such as firing union activists. Many states, in contrast, allow public sector workers an intimidation-free union selection process where a union may be certified once a majority of workers have signed a petition requesting a union. Union membership rates grew from 35.9 to 36.8 percent (275,000 additional workers) in the public sector during the past year, while membership in the private sector only grew from 7.5 to 7.6 percent (151,000 workers).

Effect on families and African-American workers

Unions paved the way to the middle class for millions of workers and pioneered benefits along the way, including paid health care and pensions. Even today, union workers **earn significantly more** on average than non-union counterparts and union employers are more likely to provide benefits. Yet as workers fall off the union rolls, their pay and benefits are jeopardized, and women and African-American workers are hit especially hard.

In 2008, 11.4 percent of female workers belonged to a union compared to 13.4 percent of male workers. The low rate of unionization among women hurts dual-income households and the millions of families that rely on a single female wage-earner. The typical wife brings home over a third of a family's total income. But women continue to earn less than men, even if they have similar educational levels and work in similar kinds of jobs as their male co-workers. Full-time, full-year women workers earn only **78 cents for every dollar** a man earns. On average, unionization raises **women's** wages about \$2.00 per hour compared to non-union workers with similar characteristics. What's more, joining a union has a much larger effect on the average woman's probability of having health insurance or a pension than finishing a four-year college degree.

Although men are more likely to be union members, unionization rates have declined more quickly among men than women. Women's unionization rate (11.4 percent) is now back up to what it was in 2000, while unionization rates among men fallen from 15.2 to 13.4 percent.

Falling union membership rates also disproportionately affect African Americans. A greater portion of African American workers (14.5 percent) are members of unions than white workers (12.2 percent), but union membership rates are declining more rapidly among African Americans. The percentage of African Americans belonging to unions dropped almost 3 percentage points between 2000 and 2008, from 17.2 percent to 14.5 percent, compared to a decline of less than one percentage point among whites from a 2000 union membership rate of 13 percent.

Many factors jeopardize the **economic well-being of African Americans** in today's economy, but unions can go a long way toward alleviating racial disparities. The unemployment rate for African Americans in December 2008 (11.5 percent) was substantially higher than that of whites (6.3 percent), and disparities in health insurance coverage and benefits persist. In 2007, 19.2 percent of African Americans did not have health insurance, compared to only 10.4 percent of whites. And only 47.1 percent of African Americans participated in an employer-sponsored retirement plan in 2007, compared to 57.6 percent of whites.

Increased unionization among African Americans would increase their pay and benefits. On average, unionization raises **African Americans'** wages by about \$2.00 per hour compared to non-union workers with similar characteristics. African-American workers in unions are 16 percent more likely to have employer-provided health insurance and 19 percent more likely to have a pension plan than similar non-union workers.

Conclusion

Recent nationwide growth in union membership levels signals that American workers want to unionize. Yet the growth of unions in the public sector, which far outpaces growth in private industries, demonstrates that there would be much higher unionization rates if all American workplaces were governed by a fair union selection process. And nearly **three in five** non-managerial American workers say they would join a union if they could.

Read more on unions:

- Project: [CAPAF's American Worker Project](#)

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