

# The number of workers represented by a union held steady in 2019, while union membership fell

**Report** • By Heidi Shierholz • January 22, 2020

New data on unionization from the Bureau of Labor Statistics show that in 2019, 16.4 million workers in the U.S. were represented by a union.<sup>1</sup> There was very little change in this figure from 2018 (+3,000). However, because employment of wage and salary workers grew at a faster rate than the number of workers represented by a union over this period (1.2% vs. 0.02%), the *share* of workers represented by a union ticked down between 2018 and 2019, from 11.7% to 11.6%. **Table 1** provides top-line numbers for union representation and union membership both overall and separately for the private sector and public sector.<sup>2</sup> What follows is a discussion based on the numbers in the table and on additional numbers that can be found in the BLS data release.

## Union membership

If a workplace is unionized and a worker is in a bargaining unit, they get the benefits of being represented by the union even if they are not a member. (No worker can legally be required to join a union, but depending on the state, private-sector workers may be required to pay a “fair share fee” toward the cost of representation). This means that the share of workers *represented* by a union is somewhat higher than the share of workers who are *members* of a union. In 2019, the share of workers represented by a union was 11.6%, while the share of workers who were union members was 10.3%, a decline of 0.2 percentage points relative to the 10.5% rate in 2018. A large portion of the 0.2 percentage point decline is attributable to a drop in union membership among local government workers, which occurred both as the result of a decline in the union membership rate for local government workers from 40.3% to 39.4% and, to a lesser degree, as the result of the loss of 48,000 local government jobs.

Table 1

**Unionization of U.S. workers, 2018–2019**

		All	Private sector	Public sector
<b>2018</b>	<b>Total employed</b>	140,099,000	118,968,000	21,131,000
	Union members	14,744,000	7,578,000	7,167,000
	Represented by a union	16,380,000	8,512,000	7,868,000
	Membership rate	10.5%	6.4%	33.9%
	Coverage rate	11.7%	7.2%	37.2%
<b>2019</b>	<b>Total employed</b>	141,737,000	120,714,000	21,023,000
	Union members	14,574,000	7,508,000	7,066,000
	Represented by a union	16,383,000	8,562,000	7,821,000
	Membership rate	10.3%	6.2%	33.6%
	Coverage rate	11.6%	7.1%	37.2%
<b>2018–2019 change</b>	<b>Total employed</b>	1,638,000	1,746,000	-108,000
	Union members	-170,000	-70,000	-101,000
	Represented by a union	3,000	50,000	-47,000
	Membership rate	-0.2	-0.2	-0.3
	Coverage rate	-0.1	-0.1	0.0

\* Totals may vary slightly due to rounding.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics Current Population Survey data on employment and union affiliation

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## The impact of *Janus*?

Do these numbers tell us anything about the impact of the June 2018 Supreme Court decision in *Janus v. AFSCME Council 31*?<sup>3</sup> It's difficult to say. The *Janus* decision means that state and local government unions are not allowed to charge workers fair share fees. It was already illegal for members of a bargaining unit to be required to either join a union or to pay for political activities; the intended effect of *Janus* by those who backed it was to undermine the finances of public-sector unions by exposing them to the “free rider” problem.<sup>4</sup> The meaningful decline in the union membership rate among local government workers (from 40.3% to 39.4%) might suggest *Janus* is having its intended effect. However, there was not a similar decline among state government workers. The share of state government workers who are members of unions rose substantially between 2018 and 2019, from 28.6% to 29.4%. The BLS data on unionization simply do not provide enough information at this point to determine the impact of *Janus*.

# Union coverage by sector, demographic, and state

In the private sector, the number of workers represented by a union increased by 50,000 in 2019, or 0.6%. But due to the 1.5% increase in private-sector employment, the share of private-sector workers represented by a union ticked down, from 7.2% to 7.1%. The biggest gains in private-sector unionization were in health care and social assistance, while the biggest losses were in retail trade.

The total number of public-sector workers (federal, state, and local government workers combined) who were represented by a union declined by 47,000 in 2019, or -0.6%. However, employment in the public sector declined at almost the same rate, so the share of public-sector workers represented by a union held steady at 37.2% (with gains in the coverage rate at the state level offsetting losses at the federal and local levels).

The share of workers represented by a union in 2019 was similar among men and women, with 12.1% of men and 11.0% of women represented by a union. The decline in union coverage in 2019 was 0.1 percentage points for both men and women. By race and ethnicity, black workers experienced the biggest decline in union coverage in 2019, declining from 13.8% to 12.7%. Nevertheless, among major racial and ethnic groups, black workers still had the highest union coverage in 2019 at 12.7%. Asian workers had the lowest rate, at 10.0%, but Asian workers experienced the biggest coverage rate increase in 2019, rising from 9.5% to 10.0%. By age, there was an increase in union coverage in 2019 among workers under the age of 45 (+127,000), while workers age 45 or older saw a decline (-125,000).

The states with the largest shares of workers represented by unions in 2019 are Hawaii (25.5%), New York (22.7%), Washington (20.2%), Rhode Island (19.0%), and Alaska (18.7%), whereas the states with the smallest shares of workers represented by unions are South Carolina (2.7%), North Carolina (3.4%), Georgia (5.0%), Virginia (5.2%), and Texas (5.2%). The largest increases in the number of workers represented by unions in 2019 were in California, Florida, New Jersey, Missouri, and Maryland, whereas the biggest losses were in New York, Ohio, Colorado, Massachusetts, and Minnesota.

## Long-run trends in union coverage

Where do these numbers fit into long-run trends? The share of workers represented by a union nationally dropped from 27.0% to 11.6% between 1979 and 2019, meaning the union coverage rate is now well less than half where it was 40 years ago (the decline over this period was from 32.4% to 12.1% for men and from 19.8% to 11.0% for women).<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that the erosion of union coverage is not because workers don't want unions anymore—survey data show that in fact, a *higher* share of nonunion workers today say they would vote for a union in their workplace than was the case 40 years ago.<sup>6</sup> One key contributor to the decline of unions is fierce corporate opposition to union organizing. It is

now standard, when workers seek to organize, for employers to hire union avoidance consultants to coordinate intense anti-union campaigns. We estimate that employers spend nearly \$340 million per year hiring union avoidance advisers to help them prevent employees from organizing.<sup>7</sup> And though the National Labor Relations Act makes it illegal for employers to intimidate, coerce, or fire workers in retaliation for participating in union-organizing campaigns, the penalties are grossly insufficient to provide a meaningful disincentive for such behavior. In more than two in five union elections, employers are charged with illegal behavior, and in at least one in five union elections, employers are charged with illegally firing workers who are involved in organizing.<sup>8</sup>

Despite these attacks on union organizing, policymakers have neglected to update labor law to ensure workers truly have the right to come together to improve their wages and working conditions. Fundamental reform is necessary. Policymakers have introduced legislation, the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act and the Public Sector Freedom to Negotiate Act, that would make crucial reforms to current labor law.<sup>9</sup> A vote on the PRO Act in the House is expected within the next few weeks. These bills would help restore union coverage and the right to representation on the job, and Congress should pass them immediately.

## Endnotes

1. Bureau of Labor Statistics, “[Union Members Summary](#)” (economic news release), January 22, 2020.
2. Employment numbers in Table 1 are from the Current Population Survey (CPS). The data source typically cited for employment is the Current Employment Statistics (CES) survey because it is a much bigger survey. However, while the CPS includes information on union affiliation, the CES does not. To do a proper analysis of changes in union affiliation, it is important to use employment and union affiliation data from the same respondents. It is worth noting, however, that employment changes in the two surveys were slightly different. In particular, while the CPS shows a small decline in public sector employment of 107,000 in 2019, the CES shows a small increase of 127,000. Given that when the two surveys show different outcomes the rule of thumb is to put more weight on the CES because it has a much larger sample size, it is likely that public sector employment increased slightly between 2018 and 2019 rather than declining slightly. Source for CES data: Bureau of Labor Statistics, Current Employment Statistics, public data series accessed through the [CES National Databases](#) and through series reports, accessed January 10, 2020.
3. Celine McNicholas, “[In 5–4 Decision, Supreme Court Undercuts Workers’ Freedom to Organize](#)” (statement), Economic Policy Institute, June 27, 2018.
4. Celine McNicholas, Zane Mokhiber, and Marni von Wilpert, “[Janus and Fair Share Fees: The Organizations Financing the Attack on Unions’ Ability to Represent Workers](#),” Economic Policy Institute, February 2018; Economic Policy Institute, “[36 Prominent Economists, Including 3 Nobel Laureates, Explain to the Supreme Court Why the Anti-Union Position in Janus Is Simply Wrong as a Matter of Basic Economics](#)” (press release), January 18, 2018.
5. Historical data are from EPI’s State of Working America data library, “[Union Coverage](#)” table, last updated August 6, 2019.

6. Thomas A. Kochan et al., “[Worker Voice in America: Is There a Gap Between What Workers Expect and What They Experience?](#)” *ILR Review* 72, no. 1 (January 2019): 3–38.
7. Celine McNicholas et al., [Unlawful: U.S. Employers Are Charged with Violating Federal Law in 41.5% of All Union Election Campaigns](#), Economic Policy Institute, December 2019.
8. Celine McNicholas et al., [Unlawful: U.S. Employers Are Charged with Violating Federal Law in 41.5% of All Union Election Campaigns](#), Economic Policy Institute, December 2019.
9. Celine McNicholas and Lynn Rhinehart, “[The PRO Act: Giving Workers More Bargaining Power on the Job](#),” *Working Economics Blog* (Economic Policy Institute), May 2, 2019; Celine McNicholas and Margaret Poydock, “[The Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act Provides Public-Sector Workers the Right to Join in Union and Collectively Bargain](#),” *Working Economics Blog* (Economic Policy Institute), June 26, 2019.