

Workers want unions, but the latest data point to obstacles in their path

Private-sector unionization rose by more than a quarter million in 2023, while unionization in state and local governments fell

Summary: The recent surge in labor actions has not translated into higher unionization rates in the latest government data. Despite workers' desire for unions, their efforts to organize are being undermined by a broken system that has failed them.

EPI

Workers want unions, but the latest data point to obstacles in their path

By Heidi Shierholz, Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, and Jennifer Sherer

January 23, 2024

Read the full report
epi.org/278125

Key findings

- In 2023, 16.2 million workers were represented by a union—an increase of 191,000. At the same time, the *percentage* of workers represented by a union decreased from 11.3% to 11.2%, as unionization efforts were unable to keep pace with 2023's strong job growth.
- By sector, private-sector unionization rose to 6.9% in 2023, while public-sector unionization declined to 36.0%.
- Unionization among workers of color accounted for the entire increase in the union level in 2023, and Black workers had the highest unionization rate at 13.1%.
- Unionization among workers younger than 45 grew by 229,000 in 2023, while unionization declined by 38,000 among workers age 45 and over.
- These statistics don't capture the number of workers who want to join unions. Evidence suggests that in 2023, more than 60 million workers wanted to join a union but couldn't do so.

Why this matters

When workers join unions, their wages rise, and their working conditions improve. But more than 50 years of efforts to block access to unions have taken a heavy toll on workers' rights. Employers have been exploiting weaknesses in U.S. labor law for decades, and federal and state policy have failed to prevent this.

How to fix it

Congress should reform a broken system that allows employers to drag their feet on recognizing employee-supported unions and negotiating in good faith. Passing legislation that protects workers is crucial. On the federal level, the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act and the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act would strengthen rights for private- and public-sector workers.



“

It is a testament to the efforts of organizers and the enthusiasm of young workers that unionization increased in the private sector by 261,000.

At the state level, policymakers should ensure that all public-sector, domestic, and agricultural workers have full collective bargaining rights. And states with so-called “right-to-work” laws should follow **Michigan’s lead** in repealing these anti-union laws.