

16 million workers were unionized in 2024

Millions more want to join unions but couldn't

Report • By Margaret Poydock, Celine McNicholas, Jennifer Sherer, and Heidi Shierholz • January 28, 2025

Interest in union organizing is surging in the United States. Since 2021, petitions for union elections at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) have more than doubled. And public support for unions is near 60-year highs—at 70%. This growing momentum around union organizing—aided by the Biden administration’s support for worker organizing and appointment of strong worker advocates in critical agencies like NLRB—signals a powerful push by workers to improve wages, working conditions, and workplace rights. But despite this groundswell of support, new data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reveal a puzzling trend: Unionization rates continue to decline.

Research shows that 60 million workers would join a union if they could. The disconnect between the growing interest in unionization and declining unionization rates can be explained by the fact that there are powerful forces blocking the will of workers: aggressive opposition from employers combined with labor law that is so weak that it doesn’t truly protect workers’ right to organize. Decades of attacks on unions both on the federal and state levels have made it hard for workers to form and maintain unions. Further, weaknesses in federal labor law have made it possible for employers to oppose unions, contributing to this decline.

In this report, we examine the 2024 Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) data on unionization and highlight recent organizing campaigns. We analyze the obstacles workers face when forming unions and reaching a first contract. Finally, we offer policy recommendations to promote unionization and generate an economy that works for all.

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Defining terms: Union membership versus union representation

If a workplace is unionized, all workers in the bargaining unit get the benefits of being represented by the union, even if they are not union members. Thus, the share of workers represented by a union is somewhat higher than the share of workers who are members of a union.

In 2024, the share of workers represented by a union was 11.1%, while the share of workers who were union members was 9.9%. Both measures are useful, but because all workers in a bargaining unit get the benefit of being represented by the union, *union representation* is the more relevant statistic when considering the impact of unionization on labor market outcomes. Therefore, we focus on union representation, rather than union membership, in our analyses.

In this report, the term “unionization rate” is shorthand for the union representation rate.

Analysis of 2024 Bureau of Labor Statistics data

In 2024, 16.0 million workers in the United States were represented by a union. This was 11.1%—more than one in ten—of all wage and salary workers. However, that 16.0 million was a drop of 170,000 from 2023, and the 11.1% unionization rate was a tick down from 11.2%.

The overall unionization numbers mask large differences in unionization by sector. For example, unionization is much higher in the public sector than the private sector. In 2024, 35.7% of public-sector workers were covered by a union contract (down from 36.0% in 2023), compared with 6.7% of private-sector workers (down from 6.9%). The public-sector declines were entirely among state and local government workers; the unionization rate among federal government workers rose by 0.9 percentage points. Within the private sector, there were particularly large movements in manufacturing, which saw a net decline in unionization of 109,000, and private education and health services, which saw a net increase of 70,000.

The BLS unionization numbers always provide a useful reminder that the conventional idea of union members being largely white men is woefully out of date. Out of all the major racial and ethnic groups, Black workers continued to have the highest unionization rates in 2024, at 13.2%. The 13.2% unionization rate for Black workers compares with 10.8% for white workers, 9.8% for Asian workers, and 9.7% for Hispanic workers. Workers of color, taken together, saw an increase in unionization levels of 68,000 in 2024, while white, non-

Hispanic workers saw a decrease of 240,000.¹

The gender gap in unionization is small, at just half a percentage point. It declined in 2024, as the unionization rate for men declined from 11.6% to 11.3%, while the rate for women increased from 10.7% to 10.8%.

More than 60 million workers wanted a union but couldn't get one

The share of nonunion workers who would like to have a union at their workplace is far higher than the share who actually have union representation. In 2024, 11.1% of workers were covered by a union contract. Survey data from 2017 show that *nearly half* of nonunion workers (48%) would vote to unionize their workplaces if they could. The 2017 figure is up substantially from previous decades. In 1977 and 1995, only about one-third (32%–33%) of nonunion, nonmanagerial workers said they would vote to unionize if they could (Kochan et al. 2018; EPI 2021).

While 2017 is the most recent year this survey was conducted, we presume that the share of nonunion workers who would like to unionize was at least 48% in 2024, given the rising popularity of unions since 2017.² In 2024, there were 128.5 million wage and salary workers who were not represented by a union; 48% of that is 61.7 million. *This means that more than 60 million workers in 2024 wanted to join a union but couldn't.*

Worker and public support for unions are on the rise

The Bureau of Labor Statistics data are just one lens into the state of organized labor in the U.S. Although the latest BLS data show a decline in the unionization rate, many workers continued to make organizing gains within auto manufacturing, hospitality, public education, and health care (Brown 2024). Further, as mentioned briefly above, other data sources illustrate that workers' interest in and public support for unions are still rising. We explore this in more detail here.

The National Labor Relations Board is an independent agency tasked with administering the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), which guarantees most private-sector employees the right to form unions and collectively bargain. The latest data from the NLRB show filings for union election petitions increased by 27% between fiscal years 2023 and 2024. Since 2021, NLRB-conducted elections have more than doubled (NLRB 2024). Further, workers are winning their elections in unprecedented numbers (Wiessner 2024). According to analysis by the Center for American Progress, the union-election win rate broke 70% for the first time in 15 years in 2023 (Glass 2024). Up until the 2010s, average win rates for NLRB-conducted elections were below 60% (Mishel, Rhinehart, and Windham 2020).

In addition to union elections, workers can also form unions through voluntary recognition. This is when employers agree to recognize a union through a majority of signed cards, rather than having workers go through a formal election process. There is no public data source that attempts to track or calculate the number of workers who gain unionization through voluntary recognition. However, a broad array of workers achieved a union through voluntary recognition in 2024, including restaurant workers at the José Andrés Group (Canham-Clyne 2024), digital journalists at CBS News (WGAE 2024), museum workers at the Oakland Museum of California (Cruz Mayeda 2024), and postdocs at Brown University (Hu 2024).

Public support for unions remains high. According to Gallup, seven in 10 Americans (70%) approve of unions. Over the last several years, approval for unions has been its highest since the 1960s (Brenan 2024). Further, a majority (54%) of adults in the United States view the decline of unionization as bad for the country, according to the Pew Research Center (Van Green 2024).

Attacks on unions have created a long-term decline

Despite strong public support and increased worker organizing, we have yet to see this momentum translate into higher unionization rates. It's worth noting that the current trend is still unfolding. It takes time to organize and win union elections, so not all union activity from the last couple of years will have translated into increased unionization yet. But even more importantly, weaknesses in current U.S. labor law make it harder for workers to join unions and bargain collectively over better pay, benefits, and working conditions.

The National Labor Relations Act guarantees most private-sector workers the right to join unions and bargain collectively. However, decades of federal policy and court decisions have weakened labor law. Most notably, the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 added an “employer free speech” clause, allowing for new legalized forms of employer opposition to unions, such as mandatory “captive audience” meetings. Today, employers often exploit weaknesses in U.S. labor law to mount aggressive opposition to unions. For example, the lack of civil monetary penalties for breaking the law allows employers to violate workers’ rights with little to no repercussions. EPI research estimates that employers are charged with violating federal law in 41.5% of all union election campaigns (McNicholas et al. 2019). Further, employers spend over \$400 million annually on consultants to dissuade and weaken workers’ unionization efforts (McNicholas et al. 2023).

Employer opposition to unions does not stop once workers win their election. After workers vote in favor of a union, they still need to negotiate with their employer for a first contract. The NLRA requires employers and unions to bargain in good faith but does not require them to reach agreement. Unfortunately, there is no governmental source that tracks data for the time it takes for a union to be recognized and sign their first contract. Studies conducted to answer this question consistently show that reaching a first contract can be a lengthy process (McNicholas, Poydock, and Schmitt 2023). According to analysis

by *Bloomberg Law*, the average time it takes for a union to reach a first contract is 465 days—well over a year (Combs 2022). Employers often drag their feet when negotiating a first contract as a tactic to diminish solidarity and morale within the union. Once a year has passed after an NLRB-certified union election, workers may request to decertify their union. Many employers see first contract negotiations as a second chance to defeat the union. This kind of aggressive employer opposition is a key driver for the decline in unionization.

The U.S. labor market is dynamic and sees a large amount of natural churn each month. For example, if the labor market adds 200,000 jobs in a given month, that would typically be comprised of around 2.5 million job gains at new and expanding businesses and 2.3 million job separations at closing and shrinking businesses—both union and nonunion. Under current labor law—which presents enormous obstacles to organizing—workers are unable to organize new union members fast enough to keep pace with the natural “churning out” of unionized jobs (Shierholz et al. 2024).

State policies also create obstacles for workers to join unions and collectively bargain. Occupational carveouts in federal labor law leave millions of public-sector, agricultural, and domestic workers without union rights unless states act. And many states lack comprehensive collective-bargaining frameworks covering public-sector workers (Morrissey and Sherer 2024).

The enactment of Taft-Hartley in 1947 allowed for states to pass anti-union, so-called “right-to-work” (RTW) laws, which have constrained workers’ right to sustain unions and collectively bargain. Consequently, RTW states have lower unionization rates compared with those without such laws (Shierholz et al. 2024). As of 2024, RTW laws have been enacted in 27 states. Research shows that states with RTW laws are associated with lower wages, reduced benefits, and high rates of workplace fatalities (Sherer and Gould 2024).

More recently, several states have further weakened workers’ ability to form unions by enacting laws that bar employers from state economic subsidies if they voluntarily recognize unions, effectively blocking one of the pathways to unionization guaranteed under federal labor law. Since 2023, three states (Alabama, Georgia, and Tennessee) have enacted laws that penalize employers if they voluntarily recognize a union (Phillips 2024).

Policy solutions at the federal and state levels

Far more workers want a union than currently have union representation. This disconnect and the overall decline in unionization are the result of broken labor law and fierce corporate opposition to unions. If the labor movement is to make the most of the public's overwhelming support for unions and boost unionization rates, it needs not just more organizing, but meaningful policy reform. Policymakers must act to ensure that U.S. workers have a meaningful right to a union and collective bargaining. The Protecting the Right to Organize Act and the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act would provide the necessary reforms; however, the current political landscape makes it difficult to pass these measures. Therefore, policymakers should prioritize the following:

Federal policies

Ensure workers can reach a first contract. Congress should pass legislation that encourages unions and employers to reach a first contract in a timely manner. The National Labor Relations Act requires unions and management to bargain in good faith but does not require that the two sides reach an agreement. As a result, the majority of unions fail to reach a first contract within a year of unionizing (McNicholas, Poydock, and Schmitt 2023). Congress should propose legislation that provides a mediation-and-binding-arbitration process when employers refuse to bargain in good faith.

Establish civil monetary penalties and preserve “make-whole” remedies. Congress should pass legislation that establishes civil monetary penalties for employers who violate the NLRA. These penalties should be commensurate with penalties associated with violations of financial and corporate law (McNicholas et al. 2021). Further, the NLRB should preserve its stance on “make-whole” remedies for workers who are victims of labor law violations. Under *Thryv, Inc.*, the National Labor Relations Board ruled that employers who are in violation of the NLRA are required to compensate workers for all “direct or foreseeable pecuniary harm” suffered because of the employers’ unfair labor practice. This includes loss of wages, benefits, and additional significant financial costs that workers incur (such as out-of-pocket medical costs or credit card debt) because of an unfair labor practice (NLRB 2022).

Nominate worker advocates to the NLRB. Corporations with a history of violating labor law are challenging the constitutionality of the National Labor Relations Board (McNicholas and Rhinehart 2024). As vacancies to the board occur, President Trump should nominate individuals with a background in supporting workers’ right to organize and a willingness to defend the constitutionality of the agency.

State policies

States play a key role, especially in the absence of much-needed federal labor law reforms. States should prioritize the following policies:

Ensure full collective bargaining rights for public employees, farmworkers, and domestic workers. Many U.S. states have enacted or recently strengthened comprehensive collective bargaining laws for state and local public-sector workers that can serve as models for states where public-sector workers lack or have recently lost such coverage (Morrissey and Sherer 2024). More states should take similar steps to ensure a pathway to collective bargaining for agricultural and domestic workers excluded from federal law.

Eliminate anti-union, so-called “right-to-work” laws. More states should restore private-sector workers’ full bargaining rights by repealing anti-union state laws, as Michigan did in 2023 and as is currently proposed in Colorado (Sherer and Gould 2024; Ventrelli 2024). States can further safeguard workers’ collective bargaining rights with constitutional language like the Workers’ Rights Amendment approved by Illinois voters in 2022 (Sherer 2022).

Protect workers’ right to opt out of coercive “captive audience” meetings. More states should continue to adopt laws protecting employees’ freedom of conscience. These policies, already in place in 12 states, prohibit employers from mandating worker attendance at meetings focused on political or religious matters. This includes the anti-union meetings that the NLRB recently ruled as constituting illegal interference with workers’ right to freely choose whether to form or join a union (Perez and Sherer 2024).

Unions are key to creating an economy that works for all, not just the wealthy few. By bringing workers’ collective power to the bargaining table, unions achieve better wages and benefits for working people. Federal and state policymakers must pursue policies that promote workers’ right to form unions and engage in collective bargaining, which in turn will foster a stronger, more equitable economy.

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Notes

1. The numbers in this sentence are our own calculations from Current Population Survey microdata (EPI 2024). We used our own calculations in this sentence only, in order to look at changes in

nonoverlapping categories of “workers of color” and “white non-Hispanic workers.” BLS’s race/ethnicity categorizations overlap—for example, white Hispanic workers are counted as both white and Hispanic—so do not allow for the desired breakdown. All other numbers cited are BLS’s published calculations.

2. Gallup polls indicate that public approval of unions grew from 61% to 70% between 2017 and 2024 (Gallup 2025). Note that the share of the public who approves of unions is related to—but not the same measure as—the share of nonunionized workers who would join a union if they could.

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