

271,500 workers went on strike in 2024

Current labor law doesn't adequately protect
workers' fundamental right to strike

Report • By [Margaret Poydock](#), [Joe Fast](#), and [Daniel Perez](#) • February 20, 2025

Hundreds of thousands of workers across the United States went on strike in 2024—from health care workers in California to public school teachers in Massachusetts to telecommunications workers in the South. The most recent data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show that 271,500 workers were involved in “major work stoppages” in 2024. The number of workers involved in these stoppages decreased by 41% compared with 2023 but remained elevated compared with strike activity in the early 2000s and 2010s.

The growing number of workers involved in collective action should come as no surprise. The United States has been experiencing decades of high and rising income inequality, largely stemming from an unequal balance of power in the labor market. Research shows unions and collective action are key tools in ensuring workers receive shared prosperity (Bivens et al. 2023). In recent years, workers’ interest in unions has surged. The number of union election petitions filed at the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) has doubled since 2021, and public support for unions has reached a 60-year high (Poydock et al. 2025). Further, the use of collective action as a tool to address the unequal balance of power between employers and workers is more crucial in a time of undependable federal labor enforcement (McNicholas 2025).

However, current labor law doesn’t adequately protect workers’ right to strike. Strikes provide critical leverage to workers seeking to improve pay and working conditions when their employer violates labor law or refuses to recognize their union. Decades of federal policy and court decisions have limited the right to strike under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA). Further, millions of workers who are excluded from the NLRA either have limited or no right to strike.¹ Despite this, thousands of workers go on strike each year.

In this report, we highlight work stoppages that occurred in 2024 and discuss the policies that are needed to strengthen the right to strike in the United States.

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What is a strike?

A strike is when workers withhold their labor from their employer during a labor dispute. By withholding their labor—labor that employers depend on to produce goods and provide services—workers can counteract existing power imbalances between themselves and their employer. Strikes provide critical leverage to workers when they bargain with employers over fair pay and working conditions, when employers violate labor law, or when they refuse to voluntarily recognize unions. Even a credible threat strike can be as powerful as the strike itself, as demonstrated by the 4,500 public transit (SEPTA) workers in Philadelphia who secured a 5% wage increase after authorizing a strike in fall 2024 (ABC 6 2024).

Strikes can also be a powerful tool to help workers reach a first contract agreement, which under weakened labor laws, can otherwise be a lengthy and delayed process (McNicholas, Poydock, and Schmitt 2023). Security workers at the Seattle Art Museum (SAM) reached a first contract after an 11-day strike in December 2024, achieving increases in hourly pay, reinstatement of retirement benefits, and expansion of health care benefits. The SAM Visitor Service Officer Union authorized the strike after 28 months of bargaining with the museum had failed to yield a contract (Irish 2024).

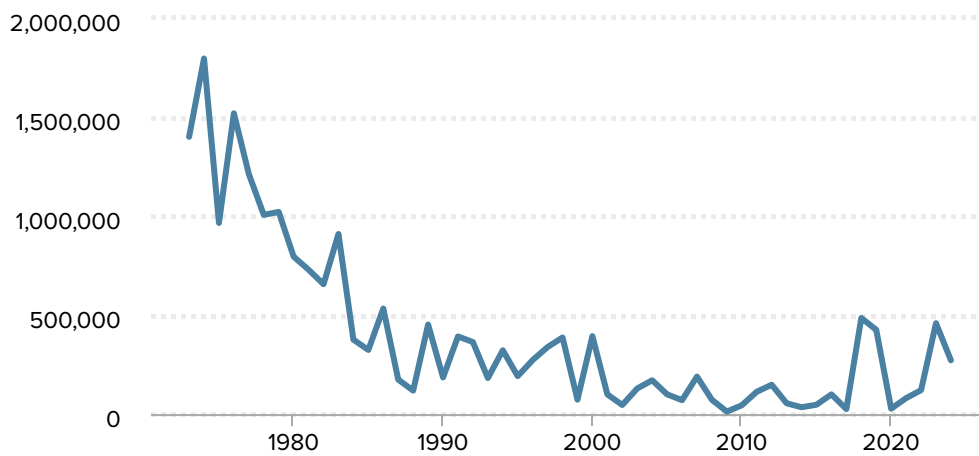
Who has the right to strike?

The National Labor Relations Act gives most private-sector workers the right to strike under Section 7 of the act.² However, federal policy and court decisions have limited the right to strike over the past several decades. For example, the passage of the Taft-Hartley Act in 1947 made “secondary” strikes illegal.³ Most recently in 2023, the Supreme Court ruled in *Glacier Northwest v. International Brotherhood of Teamsters* that workers can be liable for economic damages caused by strikes in certain cases.

There is no federal law that provides public-sector workers with the right to form unions or engage in collective bargaining. The result is a patchwork of state laws, many of which make it unlawful for public-sector workers to go on strike. In states where public-sector workers have the right to strike, strikes are an effective tool to secure fair pay and improved working conditions. For example, 65,000 Los Angeles school teachers secured a 30% wage increase after a three-day strike in 2023 (AP 2023). Even without this right, many public-sector workers take on the risk of striking and demanding better pay and working conditions, as demonstrated by the 2018 and 2019 “Red for Ed” teachers and, more recently, the 2023 University of Michigan graduate student worker strike (Poydock and Sherer 2024).

Figure A

Number of workers involved in major work stoppages, 1973–2024



Notes: The Bureau of Labor Statistics does not distinguish between strikes and lockouts in its work stoppage data. However, lockouts (which are initiated by management) are rare relative to strikes, so it is reasonable to think of the major work stoppage data as a proxy for data on major strikes. Data are for public- and private-sector workers.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, “[Work Stoppages Summary](#)” (news release), February 20, 2025, and [related table](#), “Annual Work Stoppages Involving 1,000 or More Workers, 1947–Present.”

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Major work stoppages data

The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines “major work stoppages” as those involving at least 1,000 workers and lasting one full work shift between Monday–Friday, excluding federal holidays. BLS data show that 271,500 workers were involved in 31 major work stoppages that began in 2024. This is a decrease from 2023, when 458,900 workers participated in 33 major stoppages. However, strike activity in 2024 is still significantly higher compared with average strike activity across the 21st century. Since 2000, there has been an average of only 148,700 workers involved in 18.6 major work stoppages per year. Despite a slowdown during the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of workers involved in major work stoppages in 2023 and 2024 has rebounded close to the high pre-pandemic levels, as shown in **Figure A**.

Most major work stoppages in 2024 took place in the private sector—roughly 68% (or 21 of them). Nine major work stoppages took place in state government and one in local government. Among strikes in the private sector, five were in the health care sector, three in accommodation and food, and three in retail. Seven of the nine major work stoppages in state government were in the education industry, involving public colleges and universities.

Major work stoppages took place in 18 states all over the U.S in 2024. The five states with the most stoppages were California (10), Oregon (5), Washington (5), Illinois (3), and New York (3).

Examples of major work stoppages in 2024

The work stoppages data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics include a breakdown of the organizations at which major work stoppages occurred. The data, combined with an EPI review of publicly available sources, suggest a range of strike activity in 2024. Recurring themes of major stoppages in 2024 include improving pay, expanding benefits, and addressing workplace safety issues. The following are examples of major work stoppages covered by the BLS data.

Boston University graduate worker strike

Approximately 3,000 workers at Boston University went on strike in March 2024. The workers, represented by the Boston University Graduate Workers Union (BUGWU)—an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), include all graduate students engaged in paid research, instructional, and teaching work at the university. The workers voted to go on strike to improve pay, expand child care benefits, and strengthen vision and dental insurance (Larkin 2024).

The seven-month strike concluded when the BUGWU and Boston University agreed to a three-year first contract that included a 70% raise for the lowest-paid Ph.D. students, additional 3% annual increases during the length of the contract, 14 weeks of paid child care leave, and the establishment of a \$200,000 emergency fund (McKenna 2024). The strike was the longest major work stoppage in 2024 and the longest higher education strike in recent history (Quinn 2024).

The Boston University strike is one of several involving student workers in 2024, including the University of Washington (West 2024), the University of California system (Mizuguchi 2024), and Cornell University (Pérez-Zetune 2024).

Dockworker strike

The U.S. port strike was one of the largest strikes in 2024. On October 1, 2024, more than 47,000 dock workers in 36 ports across the country went on strike. The workers, represented by the International Longshoremen's Association (ILA), authorized a strike after the union and the United States Maritime Alliance (USMX) failed to reach agreement after several months of negotiations. The ILA was seeking pay raises that account for inflation and the increased shipping profits in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Sherman 2024). The International Longshoremen's Association was also negotiating over stronger language to protect workers from the impact of automation (Krisher and Vejpongsa 2024).

The two-day strike concluded after the ILA and USMX reached a tentative agreement that included a 62% pay increase for workers over the length of a six-year contract (Oladipo and Shepardson 2024). The tentative agreement also suspended workers from striking until January 2025, while both parties continued to negotiate over language concerning automation. On January 9, 2025, the ILA and USMX announced that they had reached

tentative agreement over a framework around automation, averting another strike (Baertlein 2025).

The U.S. Department of Labor played an important role in securing both tentative agreements. Acting Labor Secretary Julie Su called on USMX to negotiate a fair contract that reflected the ILA members' contributions to the companies' record-breaking profits (DOL 2024; Rainey 2025). The October 2024 strike was the first for the union since 1977.

AT&T worker strike

The AT&T worker strike that spanned the Southeast was another historic major work stoppage. In August 2024, approximately 17,000 AT&T workers went on strike in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. The workers, represented by the Communications Workers of America (CWA), include technicians, customer service representatives, and others (Hyde 2024b). The CWA members voted to strike after having filed unfair labor practice charges against AT&T for failing to bargain in good faith (Rosman 2024).

The 30-day strike ended after CWA and AT&T reached tentative agreement on a five-year contract that included an across-the-board wage increase of nearly 20%, an additional 3% wage increase for wire technicians and utility operations, and a framework for more affordable health care during the duration of the contract (Hyde 2024a; CWA 2024a). The strike was the longest telecommunications strike in the history of the Southeast (Marr, Redd, and McFarland 2024; CWA 2024a).

Boeing worker strike

On September 13, 2024, 33,000 Boeing workers represented by the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAM) went on strike in Washington, Oregon, and California. This was the first strike at Boeing since 2008, and in the years since then, Boeing workers had experienced wage stagnation and significant loss of benefits. For example, Boeing froze workers' traditional pension plan in 2014 (Rose 2024b).

Boeing workers voted 96% in favor of approving a strike after rejecting a company offer that included 25% wage increases over four years (Koenig and Valdes 2024). Workers went on strike to fight for higher pay and restoration of the defined-benefit pension plan (Rose 2024a).

The strike ended after 36 days, when 59% of members voted to approve a new contract offer (Rose 2024b). In the final agreement, workers won a 38% general wage increase and stronger retirement benefits (IAM 2024). The IAM strike received broad public support, particularly over concerns about how years of declining job quality for workers had affected Boeing aircraft safety (IAM 2024). The Boeing strike was the third-largest major work stoppage in 2024 in terms of number of workers and the longest strike among those with over 20,000 workers (BLS 2025b).

North Shore educator strikes

In November 2024, over 2,000 public school teachers in Beverly, Gloucester, and Marblehead, Massachusetts, went on strike. The strike started after the Massachusetts Teachers Association and the school districts failed to reach agreement over competitive pay for teachers and paraprofessionals, paid parental leave benefits, and concerns about school safety and class size (Farrar and Cristantiello 2024).

The over two-week strike ended after the unions and school districts reached agreements that included pay increases for teachers and paraprofessionals, expansion of paid leave benefits, and improvements in classroom safety (Patkin 2024). The Beverly teacher strike lasted 15 days, becoming the longest teacher strike in modern Massachusetts history (Palumbo, Markos, and Hope 2024). The North Shore educator strikes are also notable because teachers do not have the legal right to strike in Massachusetts.

Limitations with the BLS data

The Bureau of Labor Statistics data on work stoppages, while useful, have a major limitation: They only include information on work stoppages (both strikes and lockouts), involving 1,000 or more workers and lasting one full work shift between Monday–Friday, excluding federal holidays. Restricting the data this way leaves out an enormous amount of information. Nearly three-fifths (58%) of private-sector workers are employed by firms with fewer than 1,000 employees, according to BLS data on firm size (BLS 2025a). The BLS work stoppages data do not capture any strike activity by these workers. For example, the 2024 data did not capture an eight-day strike involving 600 *New York Times* Games and Cooking workers because it did not meet the size limitations of the BLS (CWA 2024b).

These size and duration limits mean that the Bureau of Labor Statistics data are not capturing many workers who walked off the job in 2024 to demand fair pay and a say in their working conditions. As an example of the disparity between BLS and other data sources in the number of work stoppages in 2024: While the BLS shows 31 major work stoppages, the Labor Action Tracker shows 359 work stoppages—356 strikes and 3 lockouts (Iyer et al. 2025).

Federal policy solutions

The 2024 BLS data on major work stoppages show that over 271,500 workers exercised the right to strike to pursue pay increases, better benefits, and safer working conditions. However, current labor law does not adequately protect workers' fundamental right to strike. The following are federal policies that would strengthen workers' right to engage in collective action:

- The Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act includes critical reforms that would strengthen private-sector workers' right to strike. The PRO Act would expand the scope for strikes by eliminating the prohibition on secondary strikes and allowing the

use of intermittent strikes. It would also strengthen workers' ability to strike by prohibiting employers from permanently replacing striking workers.

- The Striking and Locked Out Workers Healthcare Protection Act would prevent employers from retaliating against striking workers by cutting off health coverage of workers and family members.
- The Food Secure Strikers Act would allow striking workers to qualify for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
- Congress should also pursue policies that extend a fully protected right to strike to railway, airline, public-sector, agricultural, and domestic workers. Under current federal law, none of these workers has the fundamental right to strike.

State policy options

States should ensure collective bargaining rights, including the right to strike, for all public-sector, agricultural, and domestic workers who are currently excluded from coverage under federal labor law. Right now, only a dozen states grant limited rights to strike to some public-sector workers (Sanes and Schmitt 2024).

States should also join New Jersey and New York in making striking workers eligible for unemployment insurance (UI) benefits. In most states, striking workers are disqualified from receiving UI, which opens the door for employers to undermine negotiations by engaging in bad-faith tactics, such as using their economic resources to “bleed-out” workers or presenting a “final offer” they know workers are likely to reject (Pattern 2023). EPI analysis estimates that this policy change would cost states less than 1% of total UI expenditures while disincentivizing such tactics (Perez 2025). Presently, lawmakers in 13 states have either previously introduced or are actively considering adopting this reform (Perez 2025).

Notes

1. Exclusions of public-sector, domestic, and agricultural workers from coverage under federal labor law mean that the basic union rights of millions of workers in these occupations are left up to states. Railway and airline workers are not covered under NLRA and instead have a far more limited right to strike under the Railway Labor Act.
2. For more information on the types of strikes and other limitations on strikes, see Bivens et al. 2023.
3. Secondary strikes are strikes aimed at an employer other than the primary employer—for example, when workers from one company strike in solidarity with another company's workers.

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