

# **Workers' resolve drives increase in unionization in 2025**

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**I**n 2025, 16.5 million workers in the United States were represented by a union—an increase of 463,000 from 2024 and the highest number of unionized workers in the U.S. in 16 years. These 16.5 million unionized workers account for 11.2% of all wage and salary workers, up from 11.1% in 2024. The increase is a departure from prior years’ downward trend in union density. It demonstrates working people’s desire for greater agency in their workplaces and in shaping the policies that affect their lives. In a time of fear, uncertainty, and hardship, the importance and benefits of unionization are especially clear. Further, this increase occurred despite the nation’s broken system of labor law and the most anti-union president in history. It is a testament to working people’s resolve and the fact that unions are increasingly viewed favorably and recognized as critical instruments for building a just economy.

## What the 2025 unionization data show

The number of workers represented by a union increased by 463,000 to 16.5 million in 2025, the highest level recorded in 16 years. These unionized workers account for 11.2% of all wage and salary workers, bringing union density back to its 2023 rate. The fact that union density is at its highest since just 2023, while the total number of union-represented workers is at its highest since 2009, reflects growth in overall employment—the denominator of the rate—over this period. When assessing trends in unionization, it is useful to examine changes in both rates and levels; rate changes capture shifts in the share of workers who are unionized, while level changes capture the net amount of successful new organizing (recalling that when new businesses open, they do not automatically adopt the unionization rate of existing firms; they must be organized, a process that requires substantial time and effort).

As a result of the government shutdown in 2025 from October 1 to November 12, the survey the union membership data are based on—the Current Population Survey (CPS)—was not conducted in October, and the 2025 figures therefore reflect an average of the remaining

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11 months. To assess the impact of the missing month on reported changes in unionization, we recalculated 2024 estimates excluding October to ensure an apples-to-apples comparison between 2024 and 2025. The results indicate that the absence of October data in 2025 did not greatly affect the key findings: Union representation increased by 439,000 in this exercise—compared with 463,000 as published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS)—and union density rose by 0.1 percentage points, identical to the published change. Nonetheless, the loss of a month of CPS data—something that has never occurred in the history of the survey—represents a serious and preventable degradation of the nation’s labor market statistics, reducing their precision, even where headline estimates appear relatively unaffected.

## Defining terms: Union membership versus union representation

BLS provides data on both union *membership*—workers who are full-fledged union members—and union representation, which includes both union members and workers who are not members but are covered by a collective bargaining agreement. As a result, the share of workers represented by a union is higher than the share who are union members. For example, in 2025, 11.2% of workers were represented by a union, 10.0% who were union members.

While both measures—union membership and union representation—are valuable, union representation is the more relevant statistic for assessing the impact of unions on labor market outcomes, since representation, not membership, determines who receives the benefits of collective bargaining. Workers in the U.S. cannot legally be required to join a union, but all workers in a bargaining unit receive the full benefits of union representation, regardless of membership status.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, and for simplicity, our analyses focus on union representation rather than union membership.

Throughout this report, the term “unionization” refers to union representation.

The overall union density of 11.2% masks large differences in unionization by sector. Unionization is far more prevalent in the public sector than the private sector: In 2025, 36.4% of public-sector workers were covered by a union contract, compared with 6.8% of private-sector workers. Both the public and the private sectors saw increases in unionization in 2025.

The public sector saw a 0.7 percentage-point increase in union density in 2025, rising from 35.7% to 36.4%. This growth reflected an increase of 236,000 unionized workers. The most notable development in public-sector unionization in 2025 occurred among federal government workers. Despite—and likely because of—the Trump administration’s aggressive attacks on federal employees and their unions, federal workers increasingly turned to collective representation. Union density among federal workers rose from 29.9%

to 31.1%, the largest single-year increase since 2011. This increase represented a gain of 40,000 unionized workers—notable given that federal government employment fell as the Trump administration slashed federal jobs.

Unionization among state and local government workers also rose—from 37.1% to 37.6%, reflecting an increase of 196,000 unionized workers.

Private-sector union coverage increased by 227,000 in 2025, pushing the unionization rate up from 6.7% to 6.8%. Within the private sector, there were particularly large gains in health care and social assistance, retail trade, and educational services. In contrast, the traditionally blue-collar industries of mining, manufacturing, and transportation and utilities saw declines. Construction was one heavily blue-collar sector to buck this trend, posting substantial gains in union coverage.

The BLS unionization numbers serve as a timely reminder that the conventional notion of unionized workers as predominantly white men is woefully outdated. As of 2025, roughly a third (32%) of unionized workers are white non-Hispanic men, while roughly two-thirds (68%) are people of color and/or women.<sup>2</sup> These shares were unchanged from 2024.

The gender gap in unionization is very small—less than 1 percentage point. However, the gap widened somewhat in 2025, as the unionization rate for men rose more than that for women: Men’s unionization increased from 11.3% to 11.6%, while women’s increased more modestly, from 10.8% to 10.9%.

Of all major racial and ethnic groups, Black workers continued to have the highest unionization rates in 2025, at 12.7%. This compares with unionization rates of 11.0% for white workers, 10.4% for Asian workers, and 9.9% for Hispanic workers. Despite maintaining the highest density, Black workers experienced a decline in 2025, dropping from 13.2% to 12.7%. This decline reflected decreases among both Black men and Black women, though the underlying dynamics differed by gender. The losses were larger among Black women, and the decline among Black women in the level of union coverage was likely due, at least in part, to falling employment in 2025—a pattern not observed among Black men, whose employment rose. The drop in Black women’s employment in 2025 has been documented in recent analyses (see Wilson 2026).

Even with the decline in unionization among Black workers, unionization among people of color overall increased more (up 289,000) than among white non-Hispanic workers (up 174,000).<sup>3</sup> This was driven by sizeable increases in unionization among both Hispanic and Asian workers.

Although younger workers tend to have lower unionization rates, the 2025 data reflect the heightened organizing activity among younger workers in recent years. Union coverage among workers under age 45 increased by 428,000, compared with an increase of 35,000 among workers age 45 and over.

Overall unionization rates obscure large differences across the country. States in the Northeast and the West tend to have higher unionization rates—particularly New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut in the Northeast, and Hawaii, Washington, Alaska, California,

and Oregon in the West. By contrast, states in the South tend to have lower unionization rates, notably the Carolinas, Arkansas, Louisiana, Georgia, and Texas. States in the Midwest tend to have unionization rates that fall somewhere in between.<sup>4</sup>

In 2025, however, this long-standing pattern showed potential signs of erosion, as the South accounted for close to half (46%) of all net gains nationwide. The region added 214,000 unionized workers, compared with 249,000 in the rest of the country combined.

## More than 50 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 far exceeds the share who are actually unionized. In 2025, 11.2% of workers were covered by a union contract. Recent survey data show that 43% of nonunion workers would vote to unionize their workplace if given the opportunity.<sup>5</sup> That is up substantially from previous decades; surveys in 1977 and 1994 found that fewer than one-third (27% and 31%, respectively) of nonunion workers said they would vote to unionize if they could.<sup>6</sup> There were 130.2 million wage and salary workers in 2025 who were not represented by a union; 43% of that is 56 million. In other words, more than 50 million workers in 2025 wanted union representation but were unable to get it.

## Unions have record high public favorability in U.S.

The 2025 rise in union density coincides with a high public favorability toward unions. Since 2021, approval for unions has remained high, with over 68% of people in the U.S. viewing unions favorably (Brenan 2025). This positive view of unions is shared across generations, with majorities of Boomers (59%), Gen X (58%), Millennials (61%), and Gen Z (63%) viewing unions favorably. Young adults (ages 18–35) have the highest favorability rate at 72% (Glass 2025). Unions are viewed positively across party lines with Democrats (90%) and Independents (69%) having high favorability rates for unions, and over 40% of Republicans approving of labor unions (Brenan 2025). Some conservative organizations recognize that unions are popular among workers: Research by American Compass finds that at least 46% of Republicans view unions somewhat favorably, with favorability increasing among young Republicans (60%) (American Compass 2025). Data from the American National Election Studies show that people in the U.S. favor unions over big business now more than ever—with the average rating for labor unions hitting a new high (60%), while big business hit a low (44%) (Sojourner and Reich 2025). Further, most people in the U.S. say the decline in union density is bad for the country (60%) and bad for working people (62%). Most young adults (69%), including young Republicans (52%) and young Democrats (82%), view the decline in union density as bad for working people (Van Green 2025).

# Benefits of unions

The high favorability of unions in the U.S. makes sense when you consider the benefits unions provide for workers. When workers join together in a union and engage in collective bargaining, their wages, benefits, and working conditions improve. Further, in communities with higher union density rates, working families have higher incomes, greater access to health care, and fewer restrictions on voting. Unions:

- **Boost wages.** On average, a worker covered by a union contract earns 12.8% more in wages than a peer in a nonunionized workplace (EPI 2025b). Further, in places or industries where unionization is strong, unions also boost wages for *nonunion* workers by effectively establishing higher standards. This is the union “spillover” effect.
- **Narrow racial wage gaps and raise women’s wages.** On average, Hispanic and Black workers represented by a union are paid 16.4% and 12.6% more, respectively, than their nonunionized Hispanic and Black peers (EPI 2025c). The wages of women represented by a union are 9.8% higher than those of nonunionized women (EPI 2025d).
- **Create healthier and safer workplaces.** Unions also improve the health and safety of workplaces by providing health insurance and paid sick time, requiring safety equipment, and empowering workers to report unsafe conditions without fear of retaliation (McNicholas et al. 2025).
- **Increase retirement security.** More than 9 in 10 unionized workers have access to employer-sponsored retirement plans. Further, union employers are more likely to contribute more toward retirement plans than comparable nonunion employers (McNicholas et al. 2025; BLS 2025).

In the same way that unions give workers a voice at their workplace, the data suggest that unions also give workers a voice in shaping their communities. Research by EPI documents a strong correlation between high-union-density states and a range of measures that promote higher incomes, healthier communities, and a stronger democracy (McNicholas et al. 2025), as reflected in:

- **Higher minimum wages.** The average minimum wage of high-union-density states is \$13.70, compared with low-union-density states’ average minimum wage of \$9.30.
- **Higher incomes.** Median household incomes in high-union-density states are more than \$12,000 higher, on average, than median incomes in low-union-density states.
- **More spending on education.** States with higher rates of unionization spend \$22,777 per pupil on education, compared with \$15,568 per pupil in low-union-density states. Further, states with higher unionization rates are less likely to have universal voucher programs.
- **Greater access to paid sick leave.** 70.6% of states with the highest union density have enacted paid sick leave legislation, compared with just 11.8% of low-union-density states.

- **Fewer voting restriction laws.** Since 2021, low-union-density states have passed 44 voter restriction laws, whereas high-union-density states passed six such laws.
- **Stronger protections for reproductive freedom.** States with abortion protections have an average union density twice as high as that of states with varying degrees of abortion restrictions and bans (Poydock 2025).

It is clear that unions provide workers with direct benefits. Further, there is an undeniable correlation between higher levels of unionization and stronger economic, community, and democratic outcomes. While these benefits have long been evident, increased recognition of unions' role in creating a more just economy and society has undoubtedly contributed to the increase in unionization in 2025. Beyond this, unions have provided representation and support to workers targeted and retaliated against by the Trump administration.

## Unions are fighting against attacks from the Trump administration

The growth in unionization in 2025 occurred despite President Trump's relentless attacks on workers and their unions. Since returning to office, President Trump has engaged in a consistent campaign against U.S. workers, making their lives less affordable in the process. From stripping federal workers' collective bargaining rights to canceling federal collective bargaining agreements, and compromising the independence of the sole federal agency that administers and enforces private-sector workers' union and collective bargaining rights, Trump has made it known that he prioritizes the interests of employers over working people.

Unions have consistently been a counterforce against Trump's attacks on workers. When the Trump administration began indiscriminately firing federal workers without cause, unions sued the administration over its efforts to downsize the federal government. Since then, a U.S. District Court judge ruled that the Office of Personnel Management wrongfully directed federal agencies to fire thousands of probationary employees (Heckman 2025). Unions have also helped win reinstatement for thousands of federal workers. In January 2026, nearly 1,000 workers at the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health, where over 90% of the workforce received layoff notices, were fully reinstated by the Department of Health and Human Services after months of pressure from unions, public health experts, and worker advocates (AFGE 2026).

In addition to legal fights, unions have been key mobilizers in helping pass legislation that reverses harms from the Trump administration. In response to Trump's executive order that stripped the collective bargaining rights from over 1 million federal workers, unions have shepherded the Protect America's Workforce Act to reverse the executive order. In December 2025, the bill passed the House with bipartisan support and has moved to the Senate, where it is currently awaiting consideration (AFL-CIO 2025).

Further, as President Trump actively makes life less affordable for workers, unions are winning contracts that are raising workers' pay. In Georgia, the International Association of

Machinists and Aerospace Workers secured a four-year contract for John Deere workers that included general wage increases of at least 2% each year of the contract, a \$3,000 ratification bonus, and no increases to insurance premiums during the length of the contract (IAM Union 2025). In Illinois, the Committee of Interns and Residents/SEIU Healthcare won a first contract for 1,000 resident physicians and fellows at the University of Chicago that included a 17% wage increase through the length of the contract (Moreno 2025). The News Guild of New York won a first contract for journalists at the New York Daily News that included salary minimums of \$60,000 and additional wage increases of 6% during the first six months of the contract (The NewsGuild of New York 2025). These are just a few of the many examples of unions raising workers' pay in 2025. In contrast, the Trump administration has put forward an economic agenda that has undermined workers' wages and eroded their economic security (McNicholas, Poydock, and Bivens 2026).

## Policy pathways to help workers win unions

The 2025 rise in unionization shows that workers are winning unions despite legal and political systems largely working against them. The increase is a testament to workers' desire to have greater agency over their working lives and a more effective voice in shaping the policies that impact their families and communities. Policymakers have long failed to reform federal labor law to deliver the promise of union representation and collective bargaining first guaranteed U.S. workers nearly 100 years ago. This failure has left workers more vulnerable to attacks, as demonstrated by President Trump's union-busting policy agenda. Still, workers are organizing their workplaces and winning contracts. If nothing else, policymakers should not allow for the passage of bad policies that make it harder for workers to win unions. But if policymakers want to deliver a pro-worker agenda that would help workers organize and collectively bargain, they should enact the following policies:

- **Restore collective bargaining rights for federal workers.** The Senate should pass the bipartisan [Protect America's Workforce Act](#), which would repeal President Trump's executive order that stripped collective bargaining rights for more than 1 million federal workers. President Trump could also rescind his executive orders that stripped federal workers of their collective bargaining rights.
- **Pass the Protecting the Right to Organize Act and the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act.** These bipartisan bills would strengthen [private-sector](#) and [public-sector](#) workers' rights to organize and collectively bargain.
- **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, most unions fail to reach a first contract within a year of unionizing. The bipartisan [Faster Labor Contracts Act](#) would establish a mediation-and-binding-arbitration process

when employers refuse to bargain in good faith.

Further, states have the opportunity to maintain—and even expand—workers’ rights and protections President Trump and Congressional Republicans are trying to roll back. They can:

- **Expand collective bargaining rights to public sector, domestic workers, agricultural workers, and app-based/gig workers.**
- **Eliminate so-called right-to-work (RTW) laws.** Twenty-six states currently have anti-union so-called RTW laws, which diminish workers’ collective power by prohibiting unions and employers from negotiating union security clauses into collective bargaining agreements. This makes it harder for workers to join, form, and sustain unions. More states should restore private-sector workers’ full bargaining rights by repealing these anti-union state laws, as Michigan did in 2023.
- **Protect workers’ right to opt out of captive audience meetings.** Fourteen states have passed legislation that prohibits employers from mandating worker attendance at meetings focused on political or religious matters. This includes mandatory anti-union captive audience meetings, which the National Labor Relations Board ruled were a violation of the National Labor Relations Act in 2024. However, the current NLRB General Counsel has previously voiced opposition toward the 2024 NLRB decision, which makes **state action** more necessary.

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## Notes

1. In states without so-called “right to work” laws, private sector workers at unionized workplaces who are not union members may be required to pay “fair share” fees to cover the cost of representation, but they cannot be required to become union members or pay full dues.
2. The figures in this sentence are the authors’ own calculations based on Current Population Survey microdata (EPI 2025a). We rely on our own calculations here in order to construct nonoverlapping race and ethnicity categories. BLS’s published race and ethnicity categories overlap—for example, white Hispanic workers are counted as both white and Hispanic—and therefore do not permit the desired breakdown. Unless specifically noted, all other figures cited in this report are derived from BLS’s published calculations.
3. The figures in this sentence are the authors’ own calculations based on Current Population Survey microdata (EPI 2025a). We rely on our own calculations here in order to construct nonoverlapping race and ethnicity categories. BLS’s published race and ethnicity categories overlap—for example, white Hispanic workers are counted as both white and Hispanic—and therefore do not permit the desired breakdown. Unless specifically noted, all other figures cited in this report are derived from BLS’s published calculations.
4. Note: We use the U.S. Census Bureau’s [Census Regions](#).
5. This number can be found in Figure B of Ahlquist, Grumbach, and Kochan 2024. It was calculated from the survey data discussed in Diaz-Linhart et al. 2023.
6. Figure B of Ahlquist, Grumbach, and Kochan 2024.

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