

Strong unions, stronger communities and democracy

Fact Sheet • By [Margaret Poydock](#) and [Celine McNicholas](#) • January 22, 2026

There is an undeniable correlation between higher levels of unionization and stronger economic, community, and democratic outcomes. States with a larger share of workers represented by a union enjoy higher incomes, greater access to health insurance, and fewer voting restrictions.

When workers join together in a union and collectively bargain with their employer, they can improve their pay, benefits, and working conditions. Union contracts provide workers with:

- **Higher wages:** Workers covered by a union contract earn, on average, 12.8% more in wages than those of nonunionized peers with comparable characteristics. When union density is high, nonunionized workers benefit too, because nonunion employers must raise wages to retain and attract workers they need.
- **Reduced racial wage gaps:** Black workers represented by a union are paid [12.6%](#) more than their nonunionized Black peers, and Hispanic workers represented by a union are paid [16.4%](#) more than their nonunionized Hispanic peers.
- **Higher wages for women:** Wages for women represented by a union are, on average, [9.8% higher](#) than those of nonunionized women with comparable characteristics.
- **Reduced income inequality:** By directly raising wages for union members and indirectly lifting pay for nonunionized workers, unions play a crucial role in raising wages for working people and narrowing income inequality.
- **Healthier and safer workplaces:** Union workers are more likely to have access to [employer-sponsored health care](#) and [paid sick leave](#) compared with their nonunion counterparts. Further, unions foster safer workplaces by [empowering workers](#) to bring up unsafe working conditions without fear of retaliation.
- **Secure retirement:** Unionized workers are more likely to have access to [employer-sponsored retirement plans](#) (94% compared with 72% of nonunion workers). Further, union employers are more likely to contribute toward retirement plans compared to nonunion employers.

Unions do more than give workers a voice at work—high union density also shapes the strength and the health of our communities. For example, states with high union density experience:

Higher wages and income

- **Higher minimum wages:** The [average minimum wage](#) of high-union-density states is \$13.70, compared with an average minimum wage of \$9.30 in low-union-density states.
- **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.
- **Greater access to retirement security:** States with smaller declines in union density experienced [smaller reductions](#) in employer-provided retirement plans.

Healthier communities and stronger social insurances

- **Greater access to health insurance:** The share of people [without any form of health insurance](#) was 5.7% in states with higher union densities, compared with 9% in states with lower union densities.
- **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.
- **Greater access to unemployment insurance:** Unemployed workers are [twice as likely to receive unemployment benefits](#) in high-union-density states than 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](#).
- **Safeguarding 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.

Stronger democracy

- **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](#). Further, 70% of states with the highest union density had not passed any voter restrictions between 2021 and 2024, while less than a quarter of medium-union-density states and low-union-density states can claim this distinction.

The evidence is clear: When unions are strong, workers have more power and communities thrive. Building union density is not just a worker or workplace issue, but it is also a mechanism to uplift families and communities. In the face of rising inequality and authoritarianism, unions organize, educate, and mobilize working people to defend voting rights, push back against disinformation, and expand civic participation. Rebuilding worker power by strengthening unions is not just good policy—it is a democratic imperative in the face of authoritarian backsliding.