



Labor Relations Week™

Source: Labor Relations Week: News Archive > 2011 > 01/27/2011 > Trends & Views > Unions: Union Membership Dropped in 2010, As Key Industries Shed Jobs, BLS Says

25 LRW 146

Unions

Union Membership Dropped in 2010, As Key Industries Shed Jobs, BLS Says

The share of wage and salary workers who belong to a labor union declined in 2010 to a new low of 11.9 percent from 12.3 percent the prior year, according to figures released Jan. 21 by the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The number of union members fell to 14.7 million workers on average last year, down 612,000 from 15.3 million workers in 2009, largely reflecting job losses in construction and state and local government despite the overall economic recovery. Since 2008, the first year of the recession, unions have lost a total of nearly 1.4 million members.

The new figures "are a telling indication of the fundamental imbalance in our nation's economy," said Kimberly Freeman Brown, executive director of American Rights at Work, a pro-union advocacy group. While corporations enjoyed record profits in 2010, "workers lost more good, union jobs," Brown said.

As in 2009, last year's membership decrease was greater among men than women (447,000 versus 165,000), but men continued to have a higher rate of membership than women (12.6 percent versus 11.1 percent).

The rate of union membership fell more among government workers than among private-sector workers but remained higher in the public sector.

The proportion of wage and salary employees who belong to a union fell by 0.3 percentage point in the private nonfarm sector, to 6.9 percent from 7.2 percent in 2009, while it fell 1.2 points among government workers, to 36.2 percent from 37.4 percent.

The number of union members employed in the private sector fell by 339,000, to about 7.1 million workers from 7.4 million, while unions lost 273,000 members in the public sector in 2010, lowering the total to 7.6 million workers from 7.9 million workers the prior year. Job losses in state and local government accounted for most of the decrease, since the number of federal employees belonging to a union declined by only 21,000.

Even so, a majority of all union members continued to be employed in the public sector (52 percent), the same as in 2009, the first year the proportion topped 50 percent.

Over the past three decades, the overall union membership rate has trended downward from 20.1 percent in 1983, when BLS first began tracking the data.

Unions Represent 13.1 Percent of Workers

Including workers who are represented by unions but are not members, the total number of unionized workers fell by 614,000 in 2010, to 16.3 million workers from 16.9 million workers the previous year.

As a result, the unionization rate, or the share of all wage and salary workers represented by unions, declined by 0.5 percentage point last year, to 13.1 percent from 13.6 percent in 2009.

The unionization rate, or the share of wage and salary employees who are represented by a union, fell by 0.3 percentage point in the private nonfarm sector, to 7.7 percent from 8.0 percent, while it dropped by 1.1 points in government, to 40.0 percent from 41.1 percent.

The number of unionized workers employed in the private sector fell by 342,000, or in 2010, to nearly 7.9 million workers from 8.2 million workers the prior year, while those working in the public sector declined by 271,000, to 8.4 million workers from almost 8.7 million workers.

The unionization rate of wage and salary workers declined last year among all demographic groups.

The new figures "are a telling indication of the fundamental imbalance in our nation's economy," said Kimberly Freeman Brown, executive director of American Rights at Work, a pro-union advocacy group. While corporations enjoyed record profits in 2010, "workers lost more good, union jobs," Brown said.

By age group, the largest decrease in the share of workers represented by unions occurred among those ages 55 to 64 (0.9 percentage point to 17.2 percent), although this age cohort continued to have the highest unionization rate. The rate was lowest among workers ages 16 to 24 (5.0 percent).

By race or ethnicity, black workers had the biggest drop in the unionization rate (0.5 percentage point to 14.9 percent), but continued to have the highest unionization rate of any group. The rate was lowest among Asian

workers (12.1 percent).

BLS derives the figures from its monthly current population survey of some 60,000 U.S. households.

Labor Groups Cite Lack of Jobs

In response to the report, labor groups blamed a weak economic recovery that has yet to translate into strong job creation.

"It's time to create good jobs, jobs that can support [a] family and provide for a secure retirement, and get America back to work," said Mary Kay Henry, president of the Service Employees International Union. More than 14 million Americans remain out of work, and many who have jobs have not had a raise in inflation-adjusted terms in more than a decade, she said.

"The decline in the number of workers who have a voice on the job makes it more difficult to reverse the economic trends that continue to put workers and our communities in crisis," Henry said.

An AFL-CIO spokeswoman said research has shown that as union membership declines so does the middle class. Last year's drop "is a reminder of how far our economic crisis has reached into working people's homes and the labor movement," Alison Omens, the labor coalition's director of media outreach, said.

"Our economy has not recovered for working people," Omens told BNA.

Daniel Griswold, director of the Cato Institute's Center for Trade Policy Studies, disagreed.

"Union leaders are running out of excuses. They can't simply blame a slowly recovering economy," Griswold said. The number of nonunion workers employed last year actually rose slightly, and private sector "union density," or the share of workers belonging to a union, at 6.9 percent, is the lowest in more than a century, he said.

Griswold argued that private-sector unions "are literally pricing themselves out of America's increasingly competitive and open markets" in the global economy.

Ben Zipperer, a senior research associate at the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington, D.C., said union membership likely will decline again this year.

"In the absence of federal support for state and local governments, public sector cutbacks will continue to depress the overall union membership rate," and offsetting increases in the private sector are unlikely without changes to federal labor law, Zipperer said.

Major Losses in Construction, Government

By major industry sector, the largest drops in union membership in 2010

occurred in construction (237,000), local government (197,000), health care and social assistance (70,000), state government (56,000), and manufacturing (52,000), BLS said.

Smaller membership declines occurred in wholesale and retail trade (39,000), transportation and warehousing (31,000), accommodation and food services (23,000), and the information sector (15,000), which includes telecommunications, while financial activities posted the only increase in union members (10,000).

Including workers represented by unions, the unionization rate declined in most industries, led by construction (1.3 percentage points to 13.7 percent), followed by transportation and warehousing (1.0 point to 21.6 percent), telecommunications (0.9 point to 16.8 percent), and local government (0.9 point to 45.9 percent).

The share of workers represented by unions dropped in health care and social assistance (0.7 point to 7.9 percent) while rising in professional and business services (0.5 point to 3.3 percent).

The private sector industry with the highest unionization rate was the utility industry (30.3 percent), trailed by transportation and warehousing (21.6 percent) and telecommunications (16.8 percent), while food services and drinking places had the lowest proportion of employees represented (1.3 percent).

Within the public sector, local government, which includes several highly unionized occupations such as teachers, police officers, and firefighters, had the highest unionization rate (45.9 percent), followed by state government (34.6 percent), and the federal government (31.4 percent).

By Larry Swisher

*The report on union membership may be accessed at
<http://op.bna.com/dlrcases.nsf/r?Open=lswr-8dblw4>.*

Contact us at <http://www.bna.com/contact/index.html> or call 1-800-372-1033

ISSN 1522-8819

Copyright © 2011, The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc.. Reproduction or redistribution, in whole or in part, and in any form, without express written permission, is prohibited except as permitted by the BNA Copyright Policy.

<http://www.bna.com/corp/index.html#V>