

UNION MEMBERSHIP LARGEST SINCE 1983 AT 12.4 PERCENT

The proportion of public and private sector wage and salary workers who were members of a labor union in 2008 rose to 12.4 percent, an increase of 0.3 percentage point from 12.1 percent in 2007, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). The rise in the share of workers who were union members was the largest since 1983, the earliest year for which comparable data is available, according to the Center for Economic and Policy Research (CEPR), a Washington, D.C.-based think tank. At that time, 20.1 percent of workers were union members. Except for the increase last year and a smaller rise in 2007, union membership has fallen or held steady in every year since 1983.

The figures on union membership are noteworthy in the current economic climate, according to Ben Zipperer, a CEPR researcher. "In 2008, union employment successfully weathered the beginnings of what may be the most severe recession in the post-World War II period. Compared to the historical trend of union membership, even in times of labor market strength, the membership gains in 2008 stand out," Zipperer says.

While the number of employed workers decreased in 2008, from 129.8 million in 2007 to 129.4 million, the number of workers who were members of unions totaled 16.1 million in 2008, an increase of 428,000 over the previous year's level. By comparison, 17.7 million workers—or 20.1 percent of all wage and salary earners—were members of unions in 1983. Between 2006 and 2007, union membership grew by 311,000 to a total of 15.7 million workers.

More government workers were members of unions than those in the private sector. The BLS reports that 36.8 percent of public sector workers were union members in 2008, up from 35.9 percent in 2007. In the private sector, 7.6 percent of workers were members of unions, a slight increase from 7.5 percent the previous year. Within the public sector, local government workers had the highest unionization rate of 42.2 percent, up from 41.8 percent in 2007. That group includes "many workers in several heavily unionized occupations, such as teachers, police officers, and fire fighters." The federal government had the lowest rate of unionization among government employers, 28.1 percent, although that was an increase from 26.8 percent the previous year.

Education and health services, adding 132,000 members, gained the largest increase in union membership, raising the percentage of members in the sector from 8.8 to 9.1 percent. The leisure and hospitality sector also grew substantially with 59,000 additional union members, increasing the proportion of members from 2.8 percent to 3.2 percent. The private sector industry with the highest rate of union membership was utilities, with 26.9 percent of workers as union members, followed by transportation and warehousing (21.3 percent), and telecommunications (19.3 percent).

By gender, union membership generally was higher for men than women, with 13.4 percent of men counted as union members, compared with 11.4 percent of women workers. Between 1983 and 2008, the union membership rate for men declined 11.3 percentage points, while the rate for women fell 3.2 percentage points, narrowing the gap between them.

By race, black workers were most likely to be union members (14.5 percent), followed by whites (12.2 percent), Asians, and Latinos (10.6 percent each).

By state, union membership rose in 26 states and the District of Columbia, while falling in 20 states, and holding steady in four states. California added 266,000 union members in 2008, increasing its union membership rate from 16.7 percent to 18.4 percent. California also had the highest total number of union members (2.7 million), followed by New York (2.0 million). About half of all union members live in six states: California, New York, Illinois (939,000), Pennsylvania (847,000), Michigan (771,000), and Ohio (716,000). North Carolina continued to post the lowest union membership rate, at 3.5 percent, although that was an increase from 3.0 percent last year. The next lowest rates were in Georgia (3.7 percent), South Carolina (3.9 percent), and Virginia (4.1 percent). New York continued to post the highest union membership rate (24.9 percent), followed by Hawaii (24.3 percent), and Alaska (23.5 percent).

The report is available at <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/union2.pdf>.

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