

New decline in US union membership

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According to the latest figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics there was another significant drop in US union membership last year, continuing a decades-long trend that has seen the percentage of the American work force organized in unions approach the level that prevailed before the industrial organizing struggles of the 1930s.

Under conditions of an expanding economy and falling unemployment, union membership fell by 159,000 last year to 16.1 million. The percentage of the work force belonging to unions fell to just 14.1 percent, down from 14.5 percent in 1996. The unionization rate among US workers in private industry in 1996 was just 10.2 percent, about the level of 1930.

The release of the figures came on the eve of last week's AFL-CIO Executive Council meeting in Las Vegas. The main business of the meeting was to provide a platform and friendly crowd for Bill Clinton, who found a brief haven from the scandals surrounding his administration. In addition the Executive Council passed a chauvinist resolution opposing any increase in immigration quotas and allocated \$13 million to oppose a California initiative aimed at curtailing the ability of unions to spend membership dues revenues to back political candidates.

The hemorrhaging of the unions continues two years into the administration of AFL-CIO President John Sweeney, whose election was generally depicted as the beginning of the revitalization of the labor movement. The latest decline came despite a much trumpeted organizing drive by the AFL-CIO. The federation claims it enrolled 385,000 new members last year, but it lost considerably more than that figure, in large part as a result of layoffs.

The trade union bureaucracy as a social layer is organically incapable of articulating the needs and concerns of the working class, particularly the most exploited layers, including the youth. But while union

membership has declined, the union officials have largely insulated themselves from the effects of the decay of their organizations. The salaries and perks of union officers have increased even as the rank and file have been driven out of the plants in the thousands and those remaining have seen their real wages slashed.

The failure of the unions to grow, even under relatively favorable conditions of an expanding job base and worker disquiet over stagnant real wages and the spread of temporary and part-time employment, underscores the fundamental and historic character of the crisis of the old labor organizations.



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