

US trade union membership at lowest level in more than a century

Jerry White
3 February 2010

Union membership in the United States fell another 10 percent in 2009, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, with the number of workers belonging to unions falling 771,000 to 15.3 million. Overall, the percentage of union members continued to fall to 12.3 percent, from 12.4 percent in 2008.

The decline was in large part due to the loss of hundreds of thousands of manufacturing and construction jobs last year due to the economic recession. This is, however, part of a decades-long trend, which has seen the percentage of private sector workers in unions fall to 7.2 percent last year, the lowest level since 1901.

Private sector unionization peaked at 30 percent in 1958, and was still 20.8 percent as late as 1980.

For the first time in history, the number of unionized workers in the public sector surpassed the number of private sector workers in unions. According to government statistics, 7.9 million public sector employees belonged to a union compared to 7.4 million private sector employees. This is despite the fact that there are five times more wage and salary workers in the private sector.

More than 37 percent of government employees belonged to unions in 2009, up 0.6 percentage points from 2008. While private-sector unions lost 834,000 members in 2009, public-sector unions actually gained 64,000 members.

The industrial unions have been incapable of winning new members and membership rolls have dwindled to virtually negligible levels in former strongholds, such as auto, steel and mining. Meanwhile, the trade union apparatus has become largely dependent on the government for its continued existence. Three times more unionized workers are employed by the US Postal

Service, for example, than in the auto industry.

There are definite material interests behind the ever-closer collaboration of the unions with the state, and undying support for the Democratic Party. The government provides the labor apparatus support in the form of the automatic deduction of union dues from workers' paychecks, as well as a seat at the bargaining table where it seeks to defend its income and privileges. In return for state sanction, the public employee unions provide millions in campaign support for the Democrats in particular, while collaborating with local, state and federal authorities to impose furloughs and wage and benefit concessions on their members.

The Obama administration has made a particular point of utilizing the services of the public sector trade unions to impose its corporate-backed agenda on the working class. This has included school "reform," in which it has enlisted the support of the American Federation of Teachers to gut federal education programs and tie funding to the expansion of charter schools and various school and teacher "performance" schemes.

In basic industry, there is little left of the trade union organizations outside of a repressive apparatus, which functions as a policeman for management. The membership of the United Auto Workers union has fallen to around 400,000, down from a peak of 1.5 million in 1979.

This is the outcome of the pro-capitalist and nationalist program of the UAW, which over the last three decades has suppressed all opposition to plant closings, mass layoffs and wage and benefit cuts in the name of "labor-management partnership" and "Buy American" protectionism.

This culminated in the UAW's collaboration with Obama's forced bankruptcy and restructuring of

General Motors and Chrysler last year. In exchange for accepting mass layoffs, the halving of wages for young workers and other concessions, the UAW executives were rewarded with a major ownership stake in the two auto companies.

Meanwhile, the former bastions of the UAW have been transformed into industrial wastelands. From 1999 to August 2009, Michigan's motor vehicle and parts manufacturing declined by 72 percent, Ohio's by 58 percent, Indiana's by 48 percent, and the nation's by 50 percent.

All told, more than 8 million industrial jobs have been wiped out since manufacturing employment peaked in 1979. The percentage of the labor force made up of manufacturing workers has continued its steady decline, falling to less than 9 percent, from a high of 39 percent in 1939.

Perhaps the sharpest expression of the moribund character of the unions is their inability to recruit younger workers. By age, the union membership rate was highest among workers 55 to 64 years old (16.6 percent), while only 4.7 percent of those 16 to 24 were union members.



To contact the WSWWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact