

Union membership in US hits lowest level in nearly a century

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Driven largely by layoffs of teachers, firefighters and other public sector workers, union membership fell by another 400,000 in 2012, to just 14.3 million, according to a report released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics this week. The number of workers in unions dropped even as total employment rose by 2.4 million last year, largely through an expansion of low-paying retail, restaurant and manufacturing jobs.

Following a decades-long trend, the percentage of overall union membership fell to only 11.3 percent. This is the lowest level since 1916, the year after the US Supreme Court upheld “yellow dog” contracts that forbid workers from joining unions.

Private sector unionization, already at the lowest rate since 1901, fell to just 6.6 percent, down from 6.9 percent in 2011. Private sector unionization peaked at 30 percent in 1958 and was still at 20.8 percent as late as 1980.

In several industrial states, union membership fell even more sharply than the national average. This included Michigan, where the percentage fell to 16.6 percent, compared with 17.5 percent in 2011. The state lost 42,000 union workers last year, down to 629,000. In contrast, in 1970 Michigan had 1.2 million union workers representing 40 percent of the state’s workforce.

The number of public sector workers in unions fell by 234,000, down to 35.9 percent of the workforce, from 37 percent the previous year. There was a particularly sharp fall in states that adopted so-called right-to-work laws that bar contracts that make the payment of union or association fees a condition of employment.

The sharp falloff in membership in Wisconsin and Indiana, and the failure of the UAW and other unions to mount any serious opposition to the passage of right-to-work legislation in Michigan last year, is a measure of

the deep alienation of workers from the unions, which are rightly seen as tools of management.

In the end, the unions only continue to stagger on at the behest of a section of big business and the government, which believe the attacks on the working class can be carried out more effectively by using the services of the union apparatus than without them.

This is what lies behind the unions’ support for President Barack Obama and the Democratic Party, even as they collaborate with the Republicans to slash social services, dismantle public education and attack the jobs, living standards and social rights of the working class. A case in point is the 2009 auto bailout, where the UAW was handed a substantial ownership stake in GM and Chrysler in exchange for agreeing to a 50 percent wage cut for new hires, the elimination of the eight-hour day and other concessions.

Even as the membership of the UAW plummeted from 1.5 million in 1979 to less than 600,000 today, the assets of the union apparatus and the salaries and perks it dispenses to its bloated staff have increased.

Public sector unions, like the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA), have likewise opposed any resistance to the austerity measures spearheaded by Obama and state and local governments led by both parties.

In a statement, AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka—who in his previous position as president of the United Mine Workers of America oversaw the virtual disappearance of the UMWA in the coalfields—blamed the collapse in union membership on “our still-struggling economy, weak laws and political as well as ideological assaults” on unions.

In fact, the shrinking of the unions to near extinction

is the result of decades-long degeneration. This is itself bound up with the anti-communist purges carried out in the postwar period and the bankruptcy of the unions' program of economic nationalism in the face of the globalization of production.

The American trade unions, like nationally based trade unions all over the world, responded to globalization by suppressing any resistance by the working class to the destruction of jobs and living standards.

In the name of making US corporations more competitive and profitable, major strikes all but disappeared. Work stoppages involving 1,000 or more workers fell to a record low of five in 2009, and only 19 in 2011. This compares to 470 in 1952, 424 in 1974 and 145 as late as 1981, the year Reagan fired the striking air traffic controllers.

The artificial suppression of the class struggle by the unions has only led to a buildup of social anger, which sooner rather than later will come to the surface. The way forward for the working class is not trying to reform these rotten organizations, which are controlled by upper middle class union executives whose interests are hostile to those of the workers they allegedly represent. Instead, new organizations, controlled by rank-and-file workers and independent of the unions and the Democratic Party, must be built to spearhead an industrial and political struggle of the working class.



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