

US union membership remains near historic low

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According to the latest US Labor Department figures the percentage of workers belonging to unions in the United States remained at near historic lows in 2013, virtually unchanged at 11.3 percent. This is the lowest overall unionization rate since 1916.

Union membership in the public sector fell to 35.3 percent, dropping by 118,000. This follows a decline of 234,000 in 2012. The public sector for many years has been the only area where union membership has been relatively stable. But the year 2013 was the first time in five years that union membership in the private sector exceeded that in the public sector.

The fall in public sector union membership came as states and municipal governments, ravaged by budget crises, continued to slash services and payrolls. Last year saw the biggest union membership losses among those employed in public assistance programs, administrative and support services, public schools and state universities.

The unions have been incapable and unwilling to mount any fight against the attacks on jobs. In Wisconsin in 2011 the unions intervened to shut down mass protests against anti-worker legislation introduced by the Republican administration of Governor Scott Walker, undermining collective bargaining rights for public employees. No longer compelled to pay dues to support the bloated salaries of the union officials who do nothing for them, workers left public sector unions in droves. The American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees in Wisconsin suffered a 45 percent drop in dues income in 2012 alone.

In Michigan the United Auto Workers and other unions mounted no serious opposition to the enactment of right-to-work legislation in a state identified with the birth of industrial unionism. The full impact of the law has not taken effect since existing contracts containing

automatic dues deduction were grandfathered in. However, the UAW is planning a dues increase, correctly anticipating a huge drop in dues income with the expiration of the contracts with the Detroit automakers next year.

The decline in public sector union membership was accompanied by a small rise of 281,000 in private sector union membership, an insignificant increase given that total employment rose by 2.2 million. This still leaves the private sector unionization rate at 6.7 percent, the lowest rate in more than 100 years.

This small rise in union membership was largely due to increases in employment in unionized workplaces, such as auto plants, and not to the winning of union representation votes. The much-touted uptick in manufacturing is a product of the Obama administration policy of “insourcing,” that is, the lowering of wages levels in the United States to make US industries competitive with low-cost areas such as China. The UAW has enthusiastically aided this process, collaborating to slash the wages, working conditions and benefits of auto workers. This has included a 50 percent cut in pay for new hires and the ending of the eight-hour day. As a result, the auto companies have seen a 27 percent reduction in hourly labor costs.

The state that recorded the largest growth in union membership was Tennessee, where the United Auto Workers is engaged in behind the scenes talks with German carmaker Volkswagen to recognize the UAW at its Chattanooga facility. The UAW is bidding to establish to what amounts to a company union through the setting up of a works council on the German model. Such councils are prohibited by German law from calling strikes and must represent the interests of the company, not the workers.

The continued stagnation in union membership under conditions of the worst economic crisis since the 1930s, with big business carrying out a relentless assault on jobs and working conditions, points to the deep alienation of these organizations from the working class. The unions are only able to stagger on based on the support they receive from a section of big business and the political establishment that believes the union apparatus is a useful tool in prosecuting class war against the working class. This is behind the unions' unflagging support for the Obama administration, even as it carries out a massive assault on the working class.

The role of the unions as pro-corporate policemen is demonstrated by their role in suppressing strikes, which again hovered at near-record lows in 2013. In the walkouts that did take place, the unions intervened to demobilize and betray the workers involved. When school bus drivers in New York City walked out last winter, the Amalgamated Transit Union intervened to shut down the strike based on empty promises from Democratic mayoral candidates to "revisit" the contract after the election. Since the strike, more than 2,000 school bus workers have lost their jobs, and the companies are eliminating pensions, medical insurance, vacation and holiday pay as well as imposing wage cuts.

The unions also isolated and betrayed a series of powerful strikes by Bay Area Rapid Transit workers that paralyzed public transport. As a consequence, workers were saddled with a contract in which pay raises were offset by reductions in pension and health care benefits.

At Boeing, the International Association of Machinists imposed an eight-year contract extension that eliminated defined-benefit pensions and imposed higher health care costs. When workers voted down the agreement, the union engineered a revote to ram it through.

Despite the continued decline in union membership, there has been no cut to the salaries and expense accounts of the union executives who have overseen the gutting of workers' jobs, wages, pensions and health care benefits.

According to figure compiled from the US Department of Labor, there were 428 union executives receiving salaries of more than \$250,000 in 2012. For example, Thomas Buffenbarger, international president

of the Machinists union, took in \$304,114 in salary and expenses. Randi Weingarten, president of the American Federation of Teachers, hauled in \$556,981 and Terrence Sullivan of the Laborers collected \$621,388. This was dwarfed by the \$1,121,988 paid out to Gerald McEntee during his final year as international president of the American Federation of State County and Municipal Employees. Some 400 UAW staff members take home salaries and expenses accounts in excess of \$100,000.

The United Auto Workers, the AFL-CIO, the Change to Win Coalition and the other unions do not represent the interests of the working class. These reactionary, anti-working class organizations serve the interests of the privileged upper middle class officials that staff their apparatus. The defense of workers' jobs, wages and living standards takes as its precondition that workers break free from the grip of the unions and build new, democratic rank-and-file-based organizations independent of the Democratic Party.



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