

New figures show continued decline in US union membership

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The rate of US union membership continued its fifty-year decline in 2014, falling from 11.3 percent to just 11.1 percent of the workforce. The new numbers released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show that unions added just 50,000 members last year compared to an overall employment growth of over two million.

Unionization rates are now at their lowest level in the US in 100 years. According to a study by two Rutgers economists, the 1916 US unionization rate was 11.2 percent. While public sector unionization showed a tiny rise in 2014, the private sector unionization rate collapsed to just 6.6 percent.

Even more striking was the decline in unionization in Michigan, once one of the most heavily unionized US states. The overall rate fell from 16.3 percent to 14.5 percent of workers in the state, representing a drop of 11 percent. In absolute numbers union membership fell by about 48,000 out of a prior total of 633,000. In 1964, 44.5 percent of Michigan workers belonged to unions, and, as late as 2004, some 21.6 percent of the state's workers were still unionized. The state now ranks 11th in overall unionization. In 2003 it ranked third.

The decline in Michigan reflects in part the impact of recently enacted right-to-work legislation. The law, which took effect in 2013, prohibits the payment of union dues as a condition of employment. The intent of the measure was to criminalize any form of collective resistance by the working class. This does not alter the fact, however, that the UAW and other trade unions are essentially business entities, which have prospered through their collaboration in the destruction of the jobs and living standards of workers. After decades of such betrayals, the unions were incapable of generating popular opposition to the passage of the reactionary law.

With union membership now voluntary, tens of thousands of workers have stopped paying dues, seeing no reason to subsidize organizations that are hostile to their interests. The Michigan Education Association alone lost nearly 5,000 members, its rolls falling to 110,000.

The full impact of right-to-work in Michigan has yet to be felt, since the law did not cover workplaces with existing labor contracts. The contracts for the major auto manufacturers covering tens of thousands of workers in Michigan employed by General Motors, Ford and Chrysler expire in September 2015, and the new agreements will be barred from making union membership mandatory.

This presents a serious problem for the UAW, since it has alienated and angered workers through its decades-long policy of union-management collaboration that has decimated the wages and benefits of auto workers, once among the highest-paid industrial workers in America. The cuts imposed by the UAW have had a particularly terrible impact on younger workers, who now start at just a little more than half of the standard wage.

As a consequence of its betrayals, UAW membership has plummeted; it is now down to less than 400,000 compared to 1.5 million in 1979. In anticipation of a further massive decline once workers are no longer compelled to pay dues, the UAW forced through a 25 percent dues increase at its constitutional convention last year.

However, the UAW apparatus has been largely insulated from the impact of its repeated sellouts. The union has developed new sources of income based on its suppression of the class struggle: joint training, real estate and investment funds, and the control of multibillion-dollar retiree health care trust funds set up

during Obama's 2009 restructuring of Chrysler and GM. Despite the decline in membership, the UAW had nearly a billion dollars in assets in 2013, including \$661 million in marketable securities, with hundreds of union executives on its staff earning more than \$100,000 per year.

The UAW is not the only union whose treasury and officers are doing well financially. The American Federation of Teachers boasted net assets of \$104 million in 2014, not counting the assets of affiliated locals, which in some cases are quite substantial. AFT President Randi Weingarten alone took in \$557,000 in salary and expenses. The rival National Education Association, meanwhile, had total assets \$336 million, according to its 2014 report and outgoing NEA President Dennis Van Roekel pocketed some \$541,000 in salary and expenses. The Service Employees International Union, meanwhile, had \$258 million in total assets, paying SEIU President Mary Kay Henry \$295,000 in salary and expenses. Robert Buffenbarger of the International Association of Machinists topped this, taking in \$319,000.

While feathering their own nests, the unions have worked to crush all manifestations of working-class militancy. The moribund character of the unions is reflected in the collapse in strike activity, which remains at historic lows. There were just nine strikes involving 1,000 or more workers in the United States in 2014, according to BLS figures. That compares to 235 in 1979, two years before the smashing of the air traffic controllers' strike, and 424 in 1974.

Where the unions have called strikes they have been token affairs that were quickly sold out. An example was the one-day walkout called by the UAW at the Lear seating plant in Hammond, Indiana last September. The UAW ended the walkout claiming it had abolished the two-tier wage at the facility, which makes seats for Ford. In fact, the agreement called for the creation of a "third tier" of low-paid workers, starting at just \$12 per hour.

The unions are able to stagger on only because of the support of a section of the corporate-political establishment, which values their services in disciplining the working class. Indeed, one of the highest points in US union membership came during World War II, when the Roosevelt administration brought the unions directly onto government-

management boards, relying on the union leadership to drive up production, impose a wage freeze and enforce a no-strike pledge.

In the recent period, the UAW has sought and received management support in its effort to "unionize" Volkswagen's Chattanooga, Tennessee assembly plant. The UAW and VW are working to establish what amounts to a company union at the facility by setting up a works council based on the German model of "co-determination." After workers voted against the UAW in a union representation election, VW allowed the UAW into the plant anyway. The union is permitted to use company meeting rooms, post literature and meet regularly with plant management. If the UAW can convince an auditor hired by VW that it represents more than 50 percent of workers, it could be installed without another union representation election.

In exchange for recognition the UAW has pledged to maintain the factory's cost-advantage over facilities run by the Detroit automakers and to underbid VW workers in other countries.

These facts speak for themselves. The US unions, like their counterparts globally, are anti-working class organizations defending the interests of a privileged upper-middle class layer whose income is dependent on its defense of capitalism and its suppression of workers struggles. To defend their interests workers must break with these organizations and build democratic rank-and-file organizations based on a new perspective and program. This means a struggle for the political independence of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist perspective.



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