

US union membership hits new record low

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Figures released this week on union membership in the United States show a further sharp decline in both absolute and relative terms, with union rolls falling by some 240,000 in 2016. Union membership as a percentage of the labor force fell 0.4 percentage points to 10.7 percent. By way of contrast, union membership in 1980 as a share of the total workforce was over 20 percent.

The continued decline in union membership during a period of supposed economic recovery is a further verdict on the bankrupt and anti-working-class character of the unions.

Both public sector unions and those in private industry saw major membership losses, with membership in public sector unions falling by more than 120,000 and private sector membership by a similar figure. By some estimates the unionization rate is now at its lowest level in more than 100 years.

The unionization rate among public sector workers was 34.4 percent, while the rate among private sector workers was a miniscule 6.4 percent. New York state had the highest unionization rate at 23.6 percent, although this figure was down 1.1 percentage points from 2015. South Carolina had the lowest unionization rate at 1.6 percent, down 0.5 percentage points from 2015.

Trade union executives have blamed the loss in membership on the spread of right-to-work laws that ban labor agreements mandating union membership as a condition of employment. The union apparatus has benefited from its ability in many states to negotiate contracts that force workers to pay dues into its coffers.

While right-to-work laws are generally directed against the democratic rights of the working class as a whole, workers have no interest in being compelled to pay dues which support the utterly corrupt trade unions. The state sanctioning of unions as the exclusive workplace bargaining agent serves to uphold the

unions' monopoly and creates a legal obstacle for workers seeking to develop alternative forms of genuine, democratic organization.

However, in 2016, the drop in union membership did not seem to be significantly affected by the existence of right-to-work laws. The decline was across the board, covering most states and demographics. In Michigan, where a right-to-work law was enacted by the state legislature in 2013, union membership fell from 621,000 to 606,000. However, in Pennsylvania, where there is no right-to-work law in effect, union membership fell even more sharply, from 747,000 down to 685,000.

Under conditions of escalating attacks on the jobs and living standards of workers, the continued hemorrhaging of membership by the American unions is a damning indictment of these organizations. The unions exist as little more than bureaucratic shells, utterly dependent on the sufferance of the corporations and the government, which still see them to some extent as useful tools for disciplining the working class and suppressing resistance.

The reactionary nature of the unions was on display this week with attempts by union officials to cozy up to the Trump administration on the basis of shared support for economic nationalism and trade war against the overseas rivals of US capitalism. Among those praising Donald Trump was Dennis Williams, president of the United Auto Workers (UAW), who called Trump's decision to withdraw from the Trans Pacific Partnership a "victory for American workers."

Continuing their role as enforcers for American big business, the unions shut down a series of strikes in 2016 that erupted in opposition to employer concession demands. This included a strike by nearly 40,000 workers at telecommunications giant Verizon.

After seven weeks on strike, the Communications Workers of America (CWA) ended picketing based on

“an agreement on principle” and ordered Verizon workers back on the job without even revealing details of the settlement. In the end workers were saddled with a contract that contained sharp increases in health care costs, the same concessions that they originally struck to oppose.

In Philadelphia, the Transport Workers Union (TWU) shut down a powerful six-day strike in early November by transit workers in order not to interfere with the presidential election campaign of Democrat Hillary Clinton. The TWU sent workers back to work without even presenting details of the proposed new contract. The deal included steep increases in health care costs and failed to address onerous work schedules that endangered the health and safety of workers, not to mention public transit riders.

Despite decades of declining membership, the assets of the unions remain substantial and the salaries and expense accounts of the union executives continue to swell. For example, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) reported assets of \$93 million in 2016 and \$327 million in receipts, not including the substantial assets of local union affiliates, which in some cases exceed those of the national union.

According to the most recent US Labor Department records, AFT President Randi Weingarten took in \$497,300 in salary and expenses in 2016, putting her well within the top 1 percent of US income earners.

The CWA reported \$536 million in total assets in 2016 with the union’s president, Chris Shelton, raking in \$218,900. Another 14 top CWA officials collected in excess of \$150,000 apiece in annual expenses and salaries.

In its most recent filings the UAW reported net assets of \$945 million, with \$289 million in total receipts, including \$28.9 million in interest income. Williams took in \$170,400 in 2015 in salary and expenses as president of the UAW. This does not include payments of \$120,000 from his position on the board of directors of Navistar and payments from the UAW Retiree Medical Benefits Trust (URMBT).

These figures refute the claims by various pseudo-left organizations that workers should subordinate their struggles to the corrupt union apparatuses because the unions remain working class organizations. The support for the unions on the part of these outfits, including the International Socialist Organization (ISO), reflects the

strivings not of the working class, but of selfish and self-absorbed social layers seeking privileged positions in the unions as well as government and academia based on racial and gender politics.

Indeed, in many cases the personnel of the union hierarchy includes supporters of the pseudo-left, such as Jesse Sharkey of the ISO, who, according to the *Chicago Sun Times*, takes in nearly \$100,000 in annual salary as vice president of the Chicago Teachers Union.

As the corporations, with the backing of the Trump administration, ramp up their assault on jobs, living standards and working conditions, there is a burning need for workers to organize in their workplaces as well as politically. However, the vehicle for the coming upsurge of the working class is not the trade unions. Utterly hostile to the interests of the working class, these organizations will seek to disorganize and crush any resistance to the attacks of big business.

Workers need new, independent organizations such as factory and workplace committees controlled democratically by the rank-and-file. This must be combined with the political mobilization of the working class based on a socialist and internationalist program.



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