

Growing numbers of US teachers abandon unions

Nancy Hanover
7 December 2017

Union membership among American teachers is in a steady, and in some regions precipitous, decline.

The percentage of US public school teachers participating in unions has dropped by 9 percent since 1999-2000, according to the 2015-2016 National Teacher and Principal Survey. Today, 70 percent of elementary or secondary teachers in public schools are union members, down from 79 percent in 1999-2000.

Overall, workers in education, training and library occupations have a 34.6 percent union membership rate, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This is down from 50 percent in 2013 and 53 percent just a decade ago. As recently as 1984, teachers' union coverage was 64 percent.

Unprecedented losses of teacher union membership have occurred in: Wisconsin (-58.3 percent), Arizona (-49.6 percent), North Carolina (-47.8 percent), Tennessee (-33.5 percent), Idaho (-28.9 percent), Indiana (-26.5 percent), with many other states recording double-digit losses.

Unionization rates in the private sector, including manufacturing, have fallen for decades, plummeting to a historic low of 6.4 percent in 2016, down from 11.9 percent in 1983 and a peak of 35 percent in 1954. Although the percentage of unionized public-sector workers fell to 34.4 percent last year, it was still five times more than the private sector rate.

Two interrelated processes contributed to the falling unionization rate for teachers. First, the Obama administration accelerated the assault on teachers and public education on behalf of Wall Street hedge funds and other school privatization interests. The 2008 financial crash and the subsequent budgetary crises of states and local school districts was used to effect a historic defunding of public education, eliminating the jobs of an estimated 366,000 teachers and other school employees.

While the Democratic president bailed out Wall Street with no strings attached, Obama increasingly tied federal education funding to the expansion of largely nonunion charter schools and test-based schemes used to fire staff and close so-called failing traditional public schools.

Obama's Race To The Top, a "hunger games"-style competition for funding of school districts had devastating

effects. In Louisiana, virtually the entire New Orleans school system was turned over to charters, and in Michigan, the birthplace of the autoworkers union—50 percent of Detroit students now attend the mostly nonunion charters. Teachers are hired on the cheap, with no pension benefits, or seniority rights. The drop in teacher union membership in both states has been dramatic, a drop of 37.6 percent in Louisiana and 26 percent in Michigan since 2011.

Far from opposing the attack on public education, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and the National Education Association (NEA) were the first unions to endorse Obama in both 2008 and 2012, and they worked assiduously to implement his corporate-backed "school reforms." When struggles erupted against school closings, teacher layoffs and privatization, as in the 2011 mass protests in Wisconsin, the 2012 Chicago teachers strike and the wildcat teacher sickouts in Detroit in 2016, the unions worked to smother these struggles and shore up the Democratic Party.

AFT President Randi Weingarten justified the unions' compliance with the grave erosion of teachers' rights with the cynical phrase "school reform with us, not against us" Both she and the AFT, as well as the NEA, have accepted substantial funds from the billionaire proponents of privatization, Bill Gates and Eli Broad.

"Right to Work"

The second factor in the decline of teacher unionization rates was the spread of "right to work" laws, which stipulate that employees are not compelled to join the union in unionized workplaces. Largely pushed by Republicans, like Wisconsin Governor Scott Walker, and right-wing billionaires, including the Koch brothers and the family of Trump's education secretary Betsy DeVos, these measures have been successfully enacted in 28 states, including former union strongholds such as Michigan and Indiana in 2012, Wisconsin in 2015, West Virginia in 2016, and Missouri in 2017.

While Democrats like Obama have traditionally relied on the

unions to impose their pro-corporate agenda, the Republicans have utilized “right to work” laws to severely weaken the unions, undermining the financial support they provide the Democratic Party.

This process is expected to be exacerbated this year with a likely decision by the US Supreme Court in *Janus v. American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees Council 31*. This case could illegalize “agency fees”—those required in some states by employees who opt out of union membership. Because these fees are often nearly equal to the cost of dues, should this measure pass, a further major exodus from the public service workers’ unions is anticipated.

The union executives blame these legal changes for their loss of membership, while denouncing teachers who opt out as “freeloaders” for not paying for the privilege of having their wages and benefits cut with the complicity of the unions. In fact, the laws only accelerated the dissolution of the unions, which has long been underway.

In a vote of no confidence in the unions, teachers—who for many years had the highest rate of unionization among any section of the working class—have voted with their feet and withdrawn from the unions by the tens of thousands.

What the “right to work” laws do show is that once the state backing of the unions is removed, and the employers no longer automatically deduct dues from workers’ paychecks, the unions are incapable of retaining the large numbers of members who see no point in paying tribute to organizations that abandoned their interests long ago.

The union bureaucracy has responded to the spread of such laws by doubling down in its collaboration with Democrats and Republicans, demonstrating to the state the value of maintaining the unions to suppress the class struggle and impose its reactionary agenda of tax cuts to the rich and draconian austerity for the rest of the population.

The real interests of the union tops

On the basis of their nationalist and pro-capitalist orientation, the unions were incapable of responding in any progressive way to the global integration of production and the historic decline of American capitalism. The United Auto Workers and other unions abandoned any connection to the traditions of the class struggle and openly embraced labor-management “partnership” and their transformation into the direct tools of the corporations.

The teachers’ unions, which once provided nominal protection for teachers and pressed for an expansion of the share of national income that went to public services, have degenerated into organizations that impose austerity, attacks on teachers’ jobs and living standards, and prevent opposition to

school closings and privatization.

They have come to represent, not the interests of the membership, but of a well-heeled upper-middle class layer entirely hostile to workers and devoted to maintaining their top-level state connections. Focused on suppressing the class struggle and safeguarding their bloated salaries through a steady stream of dues, or coerced agency fees, this union bureaucracy is a breed apart.

NEA President Lily Eskelsen Garcia last year took in \$416,633 in salary and expenses, while AFT President Randi Weingarten netted \$497,300, putting them both at or near the top 1 percent of earners.

Additionally, they maintain an extensive apparatus, a well-paid cadre of over 1,000 salaried positions at the national level. This reporter counted a total of 396 NEA operatives on the payroll with countless officials, “associate directors” and “organizational specialists,” each bringing home from \$100,000 to \$430,000 annually. An average teacher’s salary is \$56,383, with large numbers of teachers earning far less. Only a few administrative assistants and “limited term employees” draw such modest salaries at NEA headquarters.

In point of fact, the AFT and NEA have been transformed into business entities and money managers. Weingarten was ranked #1 on Institutional Investor magazine’s 40 most “influential players in US pensions” in 2013, according to Axios. The union has involved itself in myriad enterprises, including credit cards and insurance peddled to the membership.

In March or April 2017, Weingarten held a secret meeting with Stephen Bannon, Trump’s fascistic aide who was then White House chief strategist. In addition to seeking a political alliance with Trump, it was widely speculated that Weingarten also discussed investing some of the teacher union pensions funds in infrastructure projects being planned by the Republican administration.

The historic decline of union membership among teachers highlights the extent to which these unions exist only at the behest of the government. Without state sanction and the automatic dues checkoff system, the unions—incapable of commanding the allegiance and loyalty of teachers—are deservingly suffering a shipwreck.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact