

As strike struggles surge, US unions record lowest ever membership rate

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The just-released US Bureau of Labor Statistics union membership and collective bargaining report for 2019 provides a detailed snapshot of the ongoing crisis of the trade unions. Despite a resurgence of strike activity in the United States last year, including a 40-day strike by workers at General Motors, union membership fell to a record low in percentage terms, with just 10.3 percent of the workforce, or 14.6 million workers, in unions.

The figures on union membership are uneven, with a larger percentage of unionized workers in the public sector, 33.6 percent, compared to a miniscule 6.2 percent in the private sector. The percentage of US workers unionized in the private sector is lower than at any time in more than 100 years, and perhaps ever.

Over half of all US union members are concentrated in seven major industrial states that account for some one third of the total US population. These include California, with 2.5 million unionized workers; New York, with 1.7 million; Illinois, with 800,000; Pennsylvania, with 700,000; and New Jersey, Washington State and Ohio, each with 600,000.

Despite enormous and growing levels of social inequality and a relentless drive by the corporations to lower living standards, workers, in particular younger workers, show little enthusiasm for unionization. The unionization rate for those 24 to 34 has fallen to just 9.2 percent, well below the average for every other age group.

The current US unionization rate of 10.3 percent is one half of the 20.3 rate in 1983. That was in the midst of a strikebreaking campaign initiated by the defeat of the PATCO air traffic controllers' strike, which was provoked by the Reagan administration. The AFL-CIO trade union federation played the critical role in isolating the air traffic controllers, whose struggle had massive popular support.

In Michigan, where the contracts for tens of thousands of autoworkers employed at Ford, General Motors and

Fiat Chrysler were up for renegotiation in 2019, there was a further drop in union membership. The rate of union membership in the state plummeted to 13.6 percent from 14.5 percent in 2018, a net decline of 36,000 members. Michigan was at the center of the largest strike by autoworkers in 50 years, when 48,000 GM workers walked off the job in September.

The year 2019 saw the collapse of a high-profile union organizing campaign by the United Auto Workers (UAW) at the Volkswagen factory in Chattanooga, Tennessee. The rejection followed failures at Nissan in Canton, Mississippi and Fuyao Glass America outside Dayton, Ohio. The defeat in Dayton was particularly telling, given that the city had once been a center of General Motors production and the scene of many militant struggles by workers going back to the 1930s.

The UAW has been wracked by the exposure of rampant corruption within its top leadership, underscored by the recent resignation of UAW President Gary Jones and the conviction of other high-level officials. The pocketing of payoffs from management by UAW leaders is only the most grotesque example of the unbridgeable chasm between the organization they head and the interests and concerns of workers it falsely claims to represent.

The unionization rate for public workers has fallen from 37 percent to 33.6 percent over the last 10 years. The rate for local government workers declined from 43.2 percent in 2011 to 39.4 percent in 2019.

The highest unionization rate is in "protective services" (33.8 percent), including police, prison guards and border patrol agents, whose function is to suppress the working class.

Meanwhile, preliminary figures from the US Bureau of Labor Statistics website indicate that in 2019, a total of 465,000 workers took part in strikes. That compares with a yearly average of just 76,000 workers on strike for the

period 2007-2017, with just 25,000 walking out in 2017. In 2018, a total of 485,000 workers were involved in strikes, the highest level since 1986. The upsurge was sparked by the walkout of educators in West Virginia, carried out in defiance of the teacher unions.

However, despite the powerful strike struggles waged in 2019, the assault on jobs and living standards continues unabated, as the unions worked to isolate and betray the strikes and impose the dictates of the employers. In the auto industry, the UAW imposed a series of sellout contracts that sanctioned plant closures and the destruction of thousands of jobs, imposed miniscule wage increases and expanded the use of super-exploited temporary workers under the cover of a bogus “pathway” to full-time status.

Other major strike struggles were also betrayed, including an 11-day strike by Chicago teachers and a weeklong strike by Los Angeles teachers. Some 2,200 Asarco copper miners in Arizona and Texas have been on strike since October, under conditions where their struggle is being isolated by the United Steelworkers.

The growth of strike struggles in the US is part of a global upsurge that recently witnessed the largest general strike in history carried out by workers in India and mass strikes and protests in France, Algeria, Chile, Lebanon, the US Commonwealth of Puerto Rico and many other countries.

In many cases, the strikes have been carried out in a rebellion against the trade unions, which have sought to prevent them or isolate and shut them down once they start. The US unions have sought to divide and disorient workers by promoting America First nationalism, pitting American workers against their brothers in Mexico, China, Europe and around the world.

These developments provide a graphic demonstration of the correctness of the assessment made by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the International Committee of the Fourth International of the reactionary and outmoded character of the trade unions.

The decline in unionization takes place amidst relatively low unemployment rates in the US and decades-long wage stagnation. Signs of social distress continue to mount, including an unprecedented decline in life expectancy.

Apologists for the AFL-CIO have tried to blame the decline of the unions on the right-wing policies of the Republican Trump administration. However, the unionization rate has fallen a full two percentage points in the last 10 years, seven of which were under the

Democratic Obama administration. The unionization rate has fallen at steady rate for the past several decades, under both Republican and Democratic administrations. It is, moreover, an international phenomenon, with unionization rates falling in virtually every advanced economy. The decline is therefore organic, not conjunctural, and points to something fundamental in the nature of the unions themselves.

The trade unions, as nationally based organizations, have no answer to the globalized character of modern capitalist production. With the rise of transnational corporations able to shift production rapidly all around the world, the unions abandoned any attempt to defend the interests of workers and adopted the program of union-management partnership. For more than 40 years they have worked consciously to lower labor costs in order to convince “their” national corporations to keep production at home and thereby maintain the flow of dues income into the coffers of the union apparatus. They sacrifice the jobs, wages and working conditions of the workers to help US industry compete on the world market, deliberate pitting workers around the world against one another in a fratricidal race to the bottom.

Workers need organizations of a new kind that do not base themselves on the acceptance of capitalism and its reactionary nation-state system. The working class is a global class and requires a program and organizations that correspond to this reality. The developing struggles of the American and international working class raise sharply the need for an international socialist perspective.

The WSWS and ICFI call for the formation of rank-and-file workplace and factory committees to unite all workers in the fight to defend jobs and living standards in opposition to the profit drive of management.



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