

US unions suffer further decline in membership rate

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The US unionization rate declined again in 2022 to 10.1 percent, the lowest rate since records have been kept, according to numbers released by the US Bureau of Labor Statistics. The unionization rate fell from 10.3 percent in 2021 and is down from 20.1 percent in 1983, when the figure was first compiled in the wake of the President Reagan’s smashing of 1981’s PATCO air traffic controllers strike.

The decline took place despite a shortage of workers that has increased workers’ bargaining power and an uptick in unionization attempts by the major unions. It occurs two years into the term of the administration of President Joe Biden, who describes himself as the most “pro-union” president in US history.

The number of union members rose by 273,000 in 2022, but this was eclipsed by the nearly 4 percent growth in overall employment, or 5.3 million more workers. The rate of private sector unionization is just 6 percent or 7.2 million workers out of 120.36 million private sector workers. The public sector unionization rate was 33.1 percent, 7.1 million workers. The unionization rate for young workers aged 16 to 24 was less than half that of workers aged 45 to 54.

The numbers for 2022 continued a decline in the percentage of union membership that has proceeded steadily for decades under both Democratic and Republican administrations. It follows an absolute decline in union membership in 2021 of 246,000 members.

The sharp fall came despite an uptick in union organizing efforts. According to the National Labor Relations Board there were 1,363 union elections held in fiscal 2022, the most since 2015. The unions won 1,041 of those elections, mostly in relatively small bargaining units such as coffee chain Starbucks.

Responding to the latest numbers on unionization,

AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler decried the decline as the result of “illegal opposition from companies that would rather pay union-busting firms millions than give workers a seat at the table.” However, this ignores the fact that the industrial unions were built in the teeth of the ferocious and violent opposition of the employers. Nor does Shuler explain why the unions have failed to advance despite the overt support of the Biden administration.

The continuing fall in union membership takes place in the context of an unbroken series of betrayals carried out by the American trade union bureaucracy, which has held wage increases well below the rate of inflation and even below the overall percentage rate increases for nonunion workers. While there was an increase in the number of strikes in 2022—there were 25 involving 1,000 workers or more—these did not result in real wage gains for workers. A whole series of strikes by health care workers and educators, including 48,000 academic workers at the University of California who are members of the United Auto Workers, were shut down on the basis of wage-cutting agreements that imposed below-inflation pay rises.

This culminated in the collusion of the railroad unions with the Biden administration in December to legislatively impose a pro-employer deal on 120,000 railroad workers, which stripped them of their right to strike and overrode their votes to reject the terms. The contract imposed below-inflation rate pay increases and maintained a hated attendance policy, which keeps many workers on call virtually 24/7.

While masses of workers sense the need to collectively organize and fight back against the impact of raging inflation, overwork and deteriorating health and safety on the job, compounded by the continuing COVID-19 pandemic, more and more are coming to

see the union bureaucracy as an obstacle to their fight.

This has been reflected in the large number of contract rejection votes by margins of 90 percent or more and the increasing turn by rail, education, health care, auto and other workers towards the building of rank-and-file committees to transfer power from the union bureaucracy into the hands of workers on the shop floor.

At the same time, the pro-company record of the unions has led to several defeats of high-profile organizing campaigns, notably at the Amazon BHM1 facility in Bessemer, Alabama. There, workers twice decisively rejected the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU) despite—or perhaps because of—the support from top Democratic and Republican officeholders, including Biden himself.

Significantly, union density is the highest in those workplaces, usually public sector, where they enjoy some degree of sanction by the state. In fact the highest levels of unionization (34.6 percent) are to be found in “protective services,” including police and prison guards. The high unionization rate among police officers says much about the character of the unions, given the role of police as enforcers of strikebreaking injunctions and protectors of scabs.

The continuing collapse of union membership under conditions of the highest levels of inflation in decades and an increase in the number of strikes and militancy, reflected in contract rejections and strike votes, underscores the assessment of the unions made by the *World Socialist Web Site* and the Socialist Equality Party. Under the impact of capitalist globalization and the unions’ nationalist and pro-capitalist program, these organizations have been transformed from defensive organizations of the working class into appendages of the corporations and the government.

This fact is further confirmed by statistics compiled by independent researcher Chris Bohner from an examination of annual union financial filings.

In 2021, net assets of unions filing financial reports with the US Labor Department grew \$3.5 billion from 2020, from \$28.1 billion to \$31.6 billion. The net assets of unions more than doubled in the period 2010–2021 even though total union membership fell by 700,000 during that same time frame.

Bohner also notes that the amount spent by the national AFL-CIO in 2021 on political action, that is

campaigning for the Democrats, dwarfed the \$10.8 million spent on organizing by a factor of two to one (\$23 million in fiscal 2022 and \$37 million in fiscal 2021). Meanwhile, unions overall have spent an average of just of \$78 million a year on strike benefits since 2010, less than 0.5 percent of their net assets.

The decline in the unions is not confined to the US, but is a global phenomenon. Everywhere, the unions have embraced corporatism, the unrestrained collaboration of unions with management to lower labor costs to help “their” corporate owners better compete on the world market. The logic of this is on crude display in Germany, where the IG Metall trade union has proposed that Ford workers take an 18 percent pay cut in order to underbid brother workers in Spain.

Strike struggles are escalating in the US and around the world in many cases in direct opposition to the trade union bureaucracy. The International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) founded by the International Committee of the Fourth International in 2021 is the most conscious organized expression of this growing rebellion. The building of rank-and-file committees in every section of the working class and the fusing of the growing class struggle with a socialist and internationalist program is the necessary foundation for defending the jobs and living standards of workers in the US and internationally.



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