

As the class struggle escalated, US union membership fell once again in 2024

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The percentage of US workers belonging to unions fell one-tenth of 1 percent in 2024, reaching a new all-time low of just 9.9 percent. The number belonging to unions declined in both absolute and relative terms. In the private sector, the number of union members was down by 184,000 while in the public sector there was a rise of just 15,000.

Union membership among private sector workers, including manufacturing workers, logistics, transportation and warehousing, fell to just 5.9 percent, the lowest rate in at least 125 years. Manufacturing alone saw union membership decline by 109,000.

The current 9.9 percent overall unionization rate compares to a rate of 20.1 percent in 1983, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The percentage of US workers belonging to unions has been in decline ever since the early 1950s, when it reached an estimated peak of around 33 percent.

Union membership is heavily concentrated among public sector workers, particularly local government employees, including teachers, firefighters and police. Tellingly, one fast growing segment has been prison guards.

Among the youth, those age 16-24, the most militant and at the same time the most exploited section of the working class, the unionization rate is just 4.3 percent. Ten states had unionization rates below 5 percent. North Carolina had the lowest unionization rate, 2.4 percent. The state, far from being a rural backwater, is now a major manufacturing center, including auto, aerospace and defense.

The decline in unionization cannot be explained by a lack of militancy on the part of workers. The last two years have seen a significant upsurge in strike activity, including the recent strike by 33,000 aircraft workers at Boeing and a three-day shut down of East Coast docks by 47,000 longshore workers last fall. Currently, 5,000 healthcare workers are on strike against Providence hospitals in Oregon and 18,000 workers at Costco stores in five states face a January 31 strike deadline.

Despite the best efforts of the union bureaucracy to prevent walkouts during its failed campaign to elect Biden and then Harris, there were still 31 major strikes in 2024, involving 281,000 workers. A total of 3,368,300 work days were lost due to the walkouts.

In 2023, 458,900 workers were involved in 33 major work

stoppages with 16.7 million work days lost. That was a 280 percent increase from 2022 and the highest number of days lost to strike in over two decades.

The fact that this upsurge in militancy has not produced any growth in union membership speaks volumes about the reactionary, pro-corporate character of the American trade union bureaucracy. As the *World Socialist Web Site* has documented, the upsurge of strike struggles has increasingly collided with the direct sabotage of the right wing trade union apparatus, which has sought to either block strikes, or where that is not possible, betray them and shut them down as quickly as possible.

For the US ruling class, the unions are seen as a critical asset as it prepares for global war. The Biden administration called the trade unions his “domestic NATO” and utilized their services in suppressing the class struggle to further the war drive against Russia and China.

Trump’s ascension to power was openly supported by Teamsters President Sean O’Brien, who was a guest at his inauguration, while International Longshore Association President Harold Daggett praised the fascist president as a hero of the working class after he blocked a renewed strike by dockworkers. UAW President Shawn Fain dropped his denunciations of Trump as a “scab” and quickly announced his willingness to work with his government of oligarchs and Nazi admirers. The rabid America First nationalism and anti-foreigner chauvinism long promoted by the union bureaucracies dovetails seamlessly with the Trump administration’s drive to split the working class through mass immigrant deportations.

The complete prostration of the bureaucracy in the face of the anti-immigrant terror was expressed by American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten, who wrote a sniveling letter to Trump, saying, “We agree that our immigration system is broken and badly in need of reform...” and “respectfully” asking him to reinstate protections for schools.

Meanwhile, the number of workers wishing to join unions, in an effort to improve their wages and working conditions, has risen sharply as well. National Labor Relations Board data shows filings for union election petitions increased by 27 percent between fiscal 2023 and 2024. The NLRB reports that filings for new union elections have more than doubled since

2021.

At every point this elemental desire to wage a collective struggle against the employers comes up against the hard fact that the union apparatus is only interested in collecting dues money, not waging any fight to better workers' lives and certainly not organizing any actions that might impinge on corporate profits.

Take the case of the Amazon Labor Union at the JFK8 warehouse in Staten Island, New York. After winning a union election based on the claim of being an independent union, the ALU fell quickly into the embrace of the Biden administration and the big business Democratic Party and the Teamsters. Although delivery drivers took part in a powerful strike at the end of the year, which coincided with the struggle by Starbucks workers, the Teamsters bureaucracy did nothing to extend the strike into the warehouses, including JFK8.

The much touted unionization drive by the United Auto Workers bureaucracy fizzled out at the first serious management opposition. In May 2024, workers at the Mercedes Benz plant in Vance, Alabama voted by a 56 percent margin against representation by the UAW. The failure exposed the union drive as a top down effort, without serious rank-and-file engagement.

Far from raising any serious demands to improve wages and workplace conditions the UAW sought to tamp down expectations in order not to alienate their "partners" in management. When Mercedes pushed back against unionization, the whole effort by the UAW collapsed ignominiously

That workers voted against the UAW is hardly surprising given the UAW's record of imposing sellout contracts on workers at the Detroit Three automakers. Despite claims of "union reform," UAW President Fain and the rest of the union bureaucracy sold out the 2023 contract struggle using a phony "Stand Up" strike to wear down worker resistance. The final contract contained below inflation pay increases and maintained the hated tier structure and the widespread use of temporary workers. Following contract ratification, the auto companies carried out the mass firing of temp workers, who had been falsely promised promotion to full time jobs by the UAW, and thousands of other job cuts.

At the one factory where the UAW did win a union representation election, the Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, Tennessee, it had tacit management support. Since starting negotiations for a first contract on September 19, the UAW has still not reach a deal and no strike deadline has been set. Few details have been released. Reports indicate the UAW is asking for a mere 14 percent pay increase over four years along with profit sharing. This would leave VW workers far behind cost-of-living rises and even behind their UAW counterparts in Detroit.

The collapse of the official trade unions is a global trend, indicating that it is not just reflective of conditions specific to the United States, but of broader tendencies rooted in the

structure of world capitalism. Everywhere, the response of the trade union bureaucracies to the globalization of production has been to establish corporatist relations, where the unions are deeply embedded into the structure of corporate management and the state.

At the same time, the international working class has grown exponentially and is interconnected in a single process of global production on a level never seen before in history. The development of an industrial counter-offensive against the transnational corporations and capitalist governments is only possible through the establishment of new organizations of working class struggle, controlled by workers themselves.

The establishment of the International Workers Alliance of Rank-and-File Committees (IWA-RFC) by the International Committee of the Fourth International (ICFI) in April 2021 was a decisive step in the fight to unify the working class across national and industrial boundaries.

As the WSWS Editorial Board wrote at the beginning of the year, "Only to the extent that power is wrested from the hands of the bureaucracy and transferred to workers on the shop floor can the unions be revived as instruments of the class struggle."

The fight to develop rank-and-file committees will not be limited to workplaces where trade unions currently exist. Instead, they will emerge as the sole form of practical organization in the overwhelming majority of work sites that are not unionized.

As the statement continued:

The IWA-RFC must be developed as the framework for workers to share information, plan collective actions and mount a united offensive against exploitation, austerity and war. It must oppose all forms of national chauvinism and anti-immigrant agitation employed by the ruling class to divide workers against each other. It must organize working class opposition to the mass deportation operations of the Trump administration and far-right governments throughout the world.



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