



Striking employees of the Los Angeles Unified School District rally in downtown Los Angeles on March 21. More than 60,000 of the district's employees went on strike for increased equity wages and raises. ROBERT HANASHIRO/USA TODAY FILE

What happened to the US labor movement?

Data shows union numbers are down

Sara Chernikoff
USA TODAY

With the screenwriters and actors strike at the forefront of the entertainment industry and hotel cleaners, Amazon warehouse employees and food industry workers following in pursuit, this summer has been coined “the summer of strikes.”

In the first eight months of 2023, more than 323,000 workers walked off the job for better benefits, pay and/or working conditions. But the rate of union members is the lowest in decades at 10.1% in 2022. With increasing strike activity over the past few years, why hasn't the rate of union membership followed?

Strike activity increases, union membership lags

In 2018, about 485,000 people participated in large-scale strikes, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the largest participation seen since 1983.

The large-scale labor action was partially driven by the Red for Ed movement in 2018 and 2019. Educators across the country and across party lines walked out for increased salaries, better working conditions and more school funding.

While worker stoppages have kept up, labor union rates have steadily declined for decades. The overall rate of union membership is much lower than

it was 40 years ago. Between 1983 and 2022, union membership fell by half from 20.1% to 10.1%.

“Union density reached a high of over 30% in the post-World War II decades in the 1950s and 1960s,” said Kent Wong, director of the UCLA Labor Center.

Are unions making a comeback?

In the first half of 2022, unions won 662 election, covering a total of 58,543 workers – the most in nearly 20 years, according to data from National Labor Relations Board (NLRB).

But union membership rates have been in decline for several decades now. In the 1950s, 1 in 3 workers were represented by a union. Now it's closer to 1 in 10.

See **UNIONS**, Page 6B

Unions

Continued from Page 5B

Why is union membership so low?

Labor laws in the U.S. make it more difficult for employees to form unions: More than two dozen states have passed "Right to Work" laws, making it more difficult for workers to unionize. These laws provide union representation to non-union members in union workplaces – without requiring the payment of union dues. It also gives workers the option to join a union or opt out.

Even if workers succeed in winning a union election, it's a two-step hurdle, Wong said. "They have to prevail in an election to be certified as the bargaining unit representing the workers in any given workplace. But beyond that, they have to get the company to agree to a contract.

"The unfortunate reality is that the laws are not working for workers."

Along with the passage of laws unfavorable toward labor unions, corporations invest money into programs and consultants who introduce union-sup-

pressing tactics to the workplace. A 2019 analysis from the Economic Policy Institute found companies spent \$340 million a year on "union avoiding" consultants who help deter organizers. And employers were charged with violating federal law in 41.5% of all union election campaigns.

Workplace sectors that were traditionally union strongholds now make up less of the workforce, such as manufacturing, transportation and construction.

Majority of Americans support labor unions

More than two-thirds of Americans approve of labor unions, according to a poll from Gallup. That rate is even higher for Americans younger than 30 – 88% responded to a poll from AFL-CIO saying they support labor unions.

Although public support for unions has been relatively high, it has not been reflected in unionization rates, Wong said. "The labor laws in this country are very heavily weighted in favor of corporations and employers and against workers." He added, "With the decline in unionization, we've also seen greater economic disparity, a bottoming out of

the middle class, and a growing number of working poor."

Why are people striking?

The Red for Ed movement in 2018 and 2019 brought educators from across the country and across the political spectrum out of the classrooms and on the front lines. Teachers demanded higher wages, more resources for students and increased funding for schools.

Karen White, deputy executive director of the National Education Association, said many of those same concerns are top-of-mind today. White joined striking teachers in North Carolina and in Oklahoma. "Educators are fed up with the lack of respect, the lack of adequate compensation, and the lack of support in schools for their students," White said.

In March 2023, more than 60,000 Los Angeles Unified School District employees – including school staff and teachers – went on strike for increased equity wages and raises.

Who belongs to labor unions now?

Nearly 35% of workers in protective service occupations were represented by

a union. That includes correction officers, police, firefighters and security guards. They had the highest unionization rates of any workforce. Education, training and library occupations followed at 33.7%, according to the labor statistics bureau.

Sales, computer and mathematical occupations and food preparation/serving-related jobs had the lowest rates of union members: all less than 4%.

Men historically have higher rates of union membership compared with women, but the gap between those rates has gotten smaller in recent years. Women now make up about 47% of all union members. Black workers continued to have a higher union membership rates (11.6%) compared with white workers (10%), Asian workers (8.3%), and Hispanic workers (8.8%).

Which states have the most union-represented employees?

Almost a quarter of workers living in Hawaii are represented by unions, according to the labor statistics bureau. At least 19 states have higher rates of employees represented by unions compared with the national average.