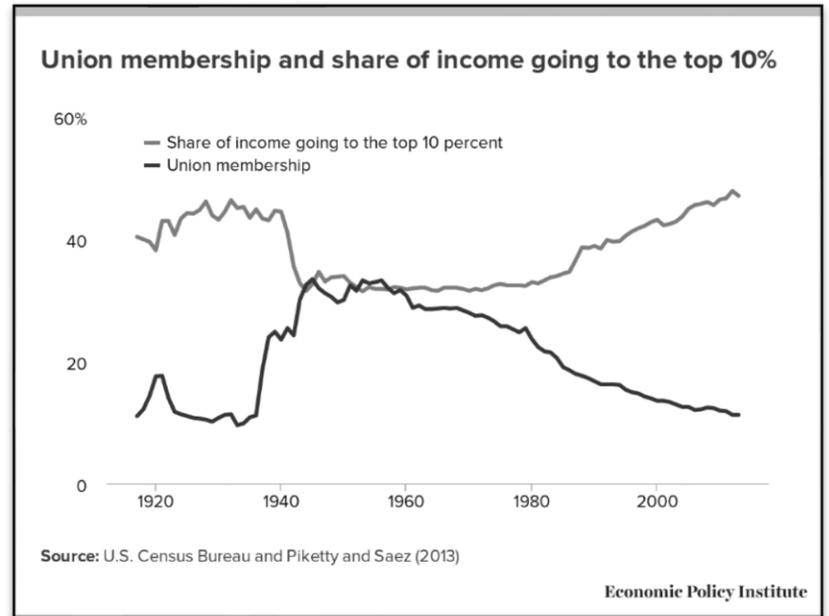


There is no strong socialist movement without a militant and powerful labor movement. DSA recognizes that if it is to become a socialist organization truly rooted in a multi-racial working class, it must expand its work both among unionized workers and among those currently without union representation. – DSA Convention, 2017

Snapshot: Unions in the U.S. Today

- There are about **15 million union members in the U.S.**, meaning **less than 11% of the workforce is unionized** (this “unionization rate” is more significant than overall numbers). **That’s the lowest concentration of union members on record.** At its height in the mid-1950s, the rate was over 30%, meaning back then one out of every three workers was a union member. As unions collapsed, so did the living standards of American workers.
- In total numbers, union members today are split about evenly between workers in the public and private sectors. **The unionization rate is much higher in the public sector**, however, where about 35% of the workforce is unionized; in the private sector, less than 7% is organized.



A Closer Look at Who’s In and Who’s Out:

- **The highest rates of unionization today are in two public sector fields:** “protective services” (police officers, firefighters) where 35% are organized; and education (teachers, librarians) where 34% are organized.
- **In the private sector, utility employees have the highest unionization rate (23%),** with transportation and warehousing in second place at 17%. These days only 12% of the American manufacturing workforce is unionized.
- **The lowest rates** are in areas like retail sales (4%); food service (1%); and finance (1%).
- But there are some upticks: **in the fastest growing segment of the U.S. economy – health care – the unionization rate has increased** since 2016, and is now at 8%.
- **Union members are geographically concentrated:** over half the 15 million union members live in just seven states (California, New York, Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Ohio), though these states account for only about one-third of the jobs in the United States. South Carolina, North Carolina, and Utah are the states with the lowest unionization rates, all below 4%.

Today’s “Typical” Union Member:

- The common media image of a union member is of a white male, and most union members in the U.S. are white (about 11 million of the 15 million total). But **African-Americans, considered as a group, are most likely to be union members**, and that’s been true for many decades now. **The unionization rate for black workers now is nearly 13%;** for white workers 11%; for Latinos 9%; for Asians also 9%.
- And in terms of gender, today **unionization rates for all men in the workforce (11%) and all women (10%) are nearly equal.** That gender gap used to be much wider. In the early 1980s, nearly one-quarter of the male workforce was unionized, while about 15% of women workers were.
- **Currently nearly half the workers covered by a union contract are women; more than a third are black, Hispanic, Asian, or other nonwhite workers.**

What Are the Major Unions? How Do Unions Operate?

- These days not all unions release their membership figures, or they may not distinguish active members from retirees. But in terms of official statistics, the largest unions in the U.S. are:
 - the **National Education Association (NEA)** represents public school teachers and other educators (around 3 million members);
 - the **Service Employees International Union (SEIU)** represents health care, maintenance and other workers in both the private and public sectors (around 2 million members);
 - the **American Federation of Teachers (AFT)**, also a union of teachers and other school employees (1.5 million members);
 - these three unions claim around 1 million members each: the **Teamsters**, which represents a broad range of workers, from truck drivers to printers, in both the public and private sector; the **American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)**, representing white and blue-collar government employees; and the **United Food and Commercial Workers (UFCW)**, representing workers in grocery stores and food processing industries.
- **Unions are structured differently, depending on who they represent.** America's first unions were craft-based organizations, and still today many – like the United Brotherhood of Carpenters, the International Association of Machinists, and the Air Line Pilots Association – represent workers with special skills or training. Members of those unions might be employed at one company, or (with construction workers, for instance) they might work at multiple locations for different employers. As major manufacturing emerged in the 20th century, industrial unions developed that organized all workers in one industry. So by the 1950s, the United Auto Workers represented all production employees, skilled and unskilled, in the auto industry.
- **Unions generally have both local and national governance; the *local*, and its elected officials, are often the most important point of contact between workers and their union.** For industrial unions, locals are often comprised of all blue-collar employees in one workplace: UAW Local 551 at the Ford plant in south Chicago, for instance. Workers there are covered by the same contract (with additional local language) as all Ford workers in America. But within other types of unions, locals may be spread out over a wide area and its members might work for one, or multiple, employers. The Chicago Teachers Union, a local of the AFT, represents the city's public school teachers, all covered by one contract. Local 1 of the Hotel and Restaurant Workers, also in Chicago, includes members from different hotels across the city, and so workers in HERE Local 1 will be covered by multiple agreements.
- **Members' dues are the primary source of union revenue.** Amounts vary depending on the union. Collective bargaining and worker representation in disputes with management – including salaries for officials, organizers, lawyers, health and safety experts, etc. – account for the lion's share of union expenditures. In the 27 "Right to Work" states, private-sector employees may opt out of paying union dues, but unions remain obliged to represent them. Many states had enacted "fair share" provisions, requiring public employees covered by a union contract to contribute to the costs of representation. But "fair share" for public employees was struck down by the Supreme Court's 2018 *Janus* decision. Declining membership has of course meant that unions have less money to spend on protecting current members and organizing new ones.
- **As organized labor's standing has declined in the U.S., so too has the use of its most powerful weapon: the strike.** From 1946 through the 1970s, hundreds of major strikes took place every year. **In 2017 there were only 7 big strikes**, the second-lowest number on record (there were only 5 in 2009). That trend could be changing: in 2018, big walkouts by teachers and hotel workers in a number of states may be the ripples preceding a new strike wave.

