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Ohio falls behind on union representation

Public sector gains aren't enough to make up for decreasing union density

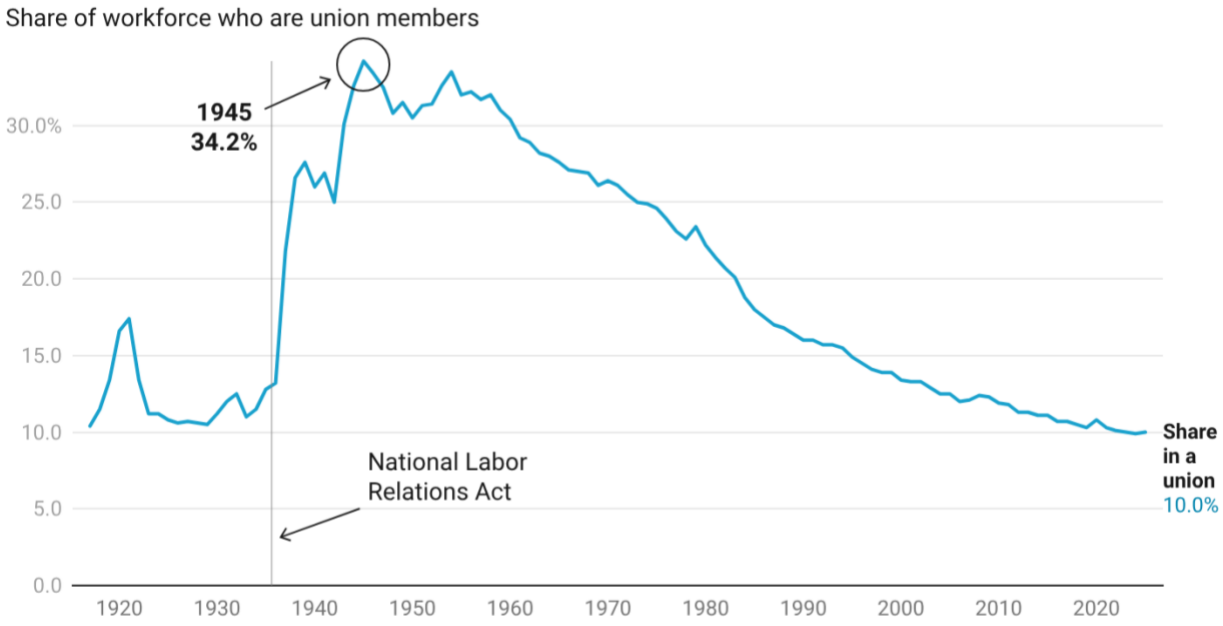
Heather Smith

American workers won the right to form a union through the National Labor Relations Act in 1935.[1] Within two years, a quarter of working people in the country were union members. By 1945, it was more than 1 in 3.

Union density — the share of the workforce who are members of a union — hit 34.2% that year.[2] It would never be that high again. By 2025, just 1 in 10 American workers was represented by a labor union — a smaller share than in every year on record, except one: 2024, when union density was 9.9%.

Figure 1

Union membership in the U.S. since 1917



State of Working America Data Library, "Historical union membership - Share in a union," 2026.

Source: Economic Policy Institute • Created with Datawrapper

Historic economic changes played a part in this decline, as the nation shifted away from traditionally union-dense industries like manufacturing[3] — but legislators also have actively chipped away at union power.[4] For example, when Congress overrode a presidential veto to pass the Taft-Hartley Amendment in 1947, it enabled states to pass "Right-to-Work" legislation, allowing employees to benefit from collective bargaining

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[1] *National Labor Relations Act. National Labor Relations Board. Accessed April 15, 2026.*

[2] *Economic Policy Institute, State of Working America Data Library, "Historical union membership - Share in a union," 2026.*

[3] *A quarter century of working Ohio. Heather Smith, Hannah Halbert, Ali Smith. Policy Matters Ohio. Sept. 11, 2025.*

[4] *Workers want unions, but the latest data point to obstacles in their path. Heidi Shierholz, Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, and Jennifer Sherer. Economic Policy Institute. January 23, 2024.*

agreements without being members of (or paying dues to) the unions that negotiated them.[5] In 2011, Ohio legislators passed Senate Bill 5, which would have stripped collective bargaining rights from public sector employees had voters not repealed the bill via veto referendum in November that same year.[6] This year, the attacks continue; the Trump Administration is moving forward with ending the collective bargaining agreements for unionized federal workers across agencies, despite ongoing litigation.[7]

In the face of inadequate federal protections, antagonistic legislators, and exploitative employers, today's unionized and unionizing workers live up to the legacy of organized labor, embodying the resiliency of the labor movement in the U.S. and around the world.

How we measure union trends

Union membership (a.k.a. union density) and union representation are the two measures used to analyze union trends, collected via the Current Population Survey.[8] **Union membership** (shown in Figure 1) looks at workers who are dues-paying members of a bargaining unit. **Union representation** (used in the remainder of this report) accounts for the impacts of Right-to-Work legislation by including all workers who are covered by a collective bargaining agreement — even those who don't pay dues to the union that bargained it.

Like union membership, union representation also increased slightly across the nation in 2025 compared to the previous year, reaching 16.5 million unionized workers, the highest in 16 years.[9] These workers account for 11.2% of all wage and salary workers.

National trends

Private sector union representation ticked up 0.1 percentage point to 6.8% of workers in the sector between 2024 and 2025, an increase of 227,000 workers represented by a union across the country.[10] Gains were made in the healthcare and social assistance,

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[5] *For example, in 1947, Congress overrode a presidential veto to 1947 Taft-Hartley Substantive Provisions. National Labor Relations Board. Accessed April 15, 2026.*

[6] *Senate Bill 5. We Are Ohio. Accessed April 29, 2026.*

[7] *OPM directs agencies to move forward with ending collective bargaining. Drew Friedman. Federal News Network. February 13, 2026.*

[8] *Data for this report is from the Current Population Survey, a monthly survey conducted by the Bureau of Labor Statistics on a statistically significant sample of approximately 60,000 households across the country. Because the data is based on a sample, it may not be a perfect representation of the population. Union density data are collected in one-on-one surveys conducted over the phone, which introduces variability depending on respondents' interpretations of the questions. Limitations aside, surveys that use statistically significant samples, like the Current Population Survey, are necessary for determining trends since a nationwide full population survey is not feasible. Union Members Technical Note. Bureau of Labor Statistics. February 18, 2026.*

[9] *Workers' resolve drives increase in unionization in 2025. Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, and Heidi Shierholz. Economic Policy Institute. February 18, 2026.*

[10] *Ibid.*

retail trade, and educational services industries, while there were declines in traditionally union-dense industries like mining, manufacturing, and transportation and utilities.[11]

Several industry sectors with historically low union density increased their union representation between 2024 and 2025. More workers in the professional and technical services sector[12] were represented by a union in 2025 than in 2024, a slight increase from 1.9% to 2.0%.[13] The financial activities supersector saw increases in union-represented workers in the insurance and real estate, rental, and leasing sectors. The food and drinking places subsector lost employment overall but increased its union representation. While differences year-to-year do not make a trend, these industries ought to be watched for further growth.

National public sector union representation increased from 35.7% to 36.4%, an increase of 236,000 workers.[14] The largest share of those gains was thanks to federal workers. The federal workforce shrank by 39,000 in 2025, but 40,000 more of the remaining workforce got organized.

Trends by race, ethnicity, and gender

Roughly two-thirds of union-represented workers are people of color and/or women.[15] While union representation among Black workers declined in 2025, from 13.1% to 12.6%, Black workers continue to have the highest unionization rate of all racial categories[16] even as AAPI, Hispanic,[17] and white workers increased their share represented by a union last year.

While the unionization rate for both men and women increased nationally, men accounted for a larger share, with the unionization rate for men increasing from 11.3% to 11.6% while women's increased from 10.8% to 10.9%.[18]

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[11] *Table 3. Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by occupation and industry, 2024-2025 annual averages. Bureau of Labor Statistics. February 18, 2026.*

[12] *For more on industry sectors, see: Industries at a Glance. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Accessed April 24, 2026.*

[13] *Ibid.*

[14] *Workers' resolve drives increase in unionization in 2025. Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, and Heidi Shierholz. Economic Policy Institute. February 18, 2026.*

[15] *Note that the percentage of Black workers represented by a union differs slightly between the BLS data and this report. This is because EPI breaks down racial and ethnic categories further than BLS – for example, BLS double counts white Hispanic workers as both white and Hispanic.*
See: Workers' resolve drives increase in unionization in 2025. Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, and Heidi Shierholz. Economic Policy Institute. February 18, 2026.

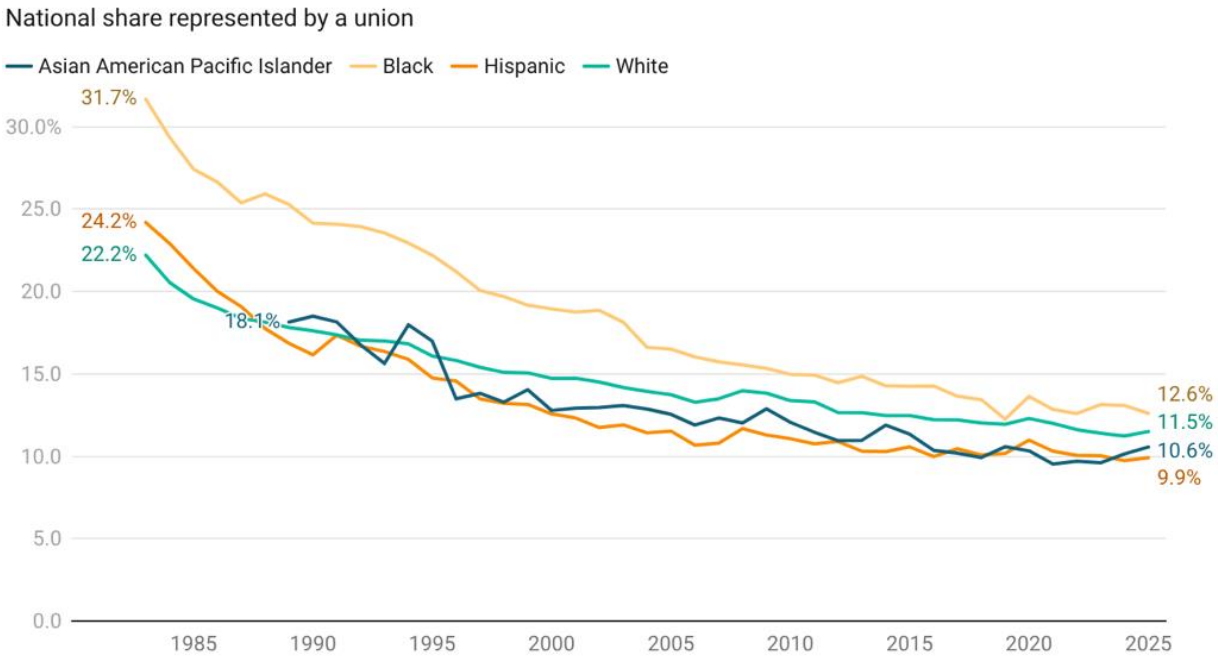
[16] *Economic Policy Institute, State of Working America Data Library, "Union membership - Share represented by a union." 2026.*

[17] *Hispanic is the term used by the U.S. Census Bureau to describe people of Spanish-speaking origin or ancestry, but not their race. The grouping is not a perfect match for populations described by terms such as "Latine" or "Latinx," though in many cases it can be used as a proxy. For more information see Pew Research Center's article, "Who is Hispanic?"*

[18] *Workers' resolve drives increase in unionization in 2025. Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, and Heidi Shierholz. Economic Policy Institute. February 18, 2026.*

Figure 2

Black workers continue to have the greatest unionization rates of all major racial and ethnic groups



Economic Policy Institute, State of Working America Data Library, "Union membership - Share represented by a union," 2026.
Missing data is due to low sample sizes

Among workers age 45 and younger, union representation increased by 428,000 from 2024 to 2025, an increase of 5.2%. Among those over 45, representation increased by 35,000, an uptick of 0.5%.[19] Polls support the idea that unions are especially popular among younger workers; young adults (18-34) have the highest favorability rate of all age groups at 72%.[20] Across Americans of all age groups, 68% approve of unions and 62% feel the decline in union membership is a bad thing for working people.

Union wage premium

It remains the case that being represented by a union leads to higher wages. Across the country, the **union wage premium** — or how much more a union worker is paid than a non-union worker — has been increasing. The union wage premium lost ground after the pandemic, but 2025 data indicate it has now surpassed its 2020 level. On average, workers represented by a union make 14.2% more than non-union workers.[21]

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[19] *Workers' resolve drives increase in unionization in 2025. Celine McNicholas, Margaret Poydock, and Heidi Shierholz. Economic Policy Institute. February 18, 2026.*
[20] *Everybody Likes Unions. Aurelia Glass. Center for American Progress. November 4, 2025.*
[21] *Economic Policy Institute, State of Working America Data Library, "Union wage premium - Union wage premium, average (regression-based)." 2026.*

Not all industries experience the same premium. While not a perfect rule, data generally show that more union-dense industries also have the greatest wage premiums.[22] The construction and transportation and utilities sectors both have over 10% union representation and wage premiums over 30%. In the two sectors with the lowest union density — financial activities and professional and business services — union workers make less than non-union workers. This suggests that the more workers are unionized in a sector, the more power they have in setting their wages.

Table 1

More often than not, greater union representation leads to greater wage premiums nationally

National share represented by a union: 11.1%
National union wage premium: 14.2%
Green: union representation and/or wage premium are above national rate
Orange: union wage premium is below national rate, but still present
Red: union representation is below national rate and/or nonunion workers hold wage premium

Industry	Represented by a Union (in thousands)	Share represented by a union	Union wage premium
Local government	4,213	41.4%	29.5%
State government	2,544	32.7%	18.8%
Federal government	1,286	31.1%	−11.3%
Transportation and utilities	1,216	15.6%	34.2%
Construction	1,078	12.0%	38.4%
Education and health services	2,445	9.6%	19.1%
Manufacturing	1,210	8.4%	7.6%
Information	182	7.6%	−9.9%
Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction	30	6.1%	N/A
Wholesale and retail trade	901	5.0%	−4.2%
Other services	248	4.0%	38.5%
Leisure and hospitality	433	3.5%	20.4%
Professional and business services	492	2.8%	−13.5%
Financial activities	190	2.0%	−10.6%

2025 Union Affiliation data, Tables 42 and 43. Union wage premium for Mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction did not meet BLS publication criteria.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics • Created with Datawrapper

Wage premiums vary by industry, but overall, unions undeniably benefit workers, most noticeably in their paychecks. A union-represented worker who is paid $30 in an industry

[22] *Union Affiliation, Tables 42 and 43. Bureau of Labor Statistics. February 20, 2026.*

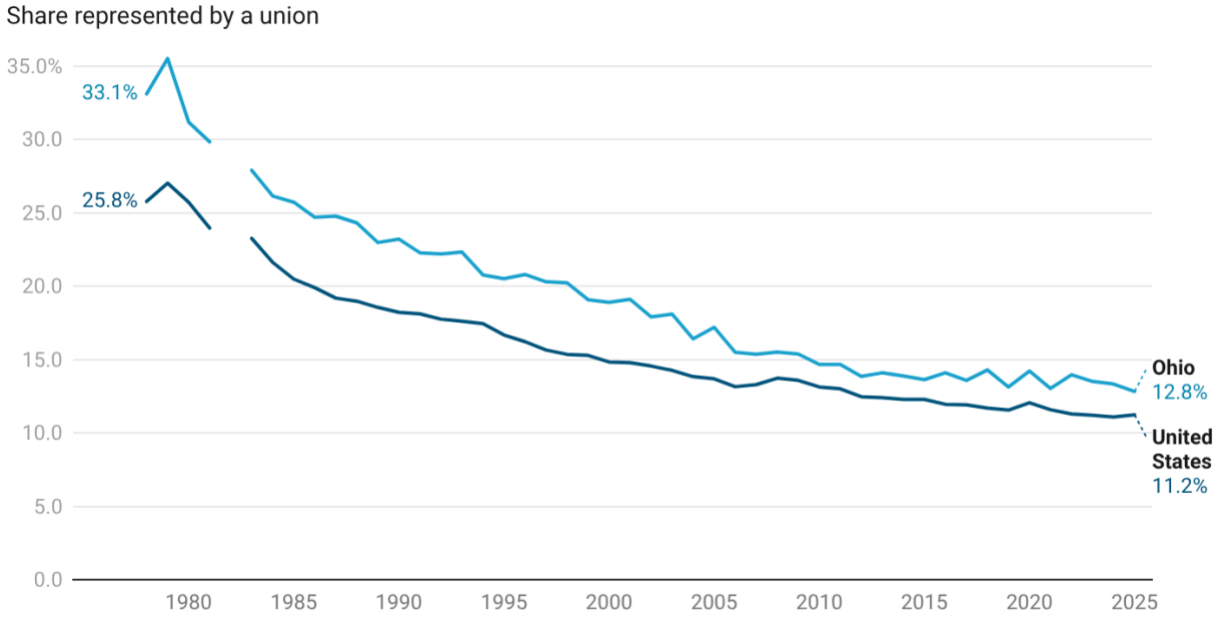
where the union premium is 14.2% (the national average) makes $3.73 an hour more than their non-union counterpart. If they work full time year-round, that is a difference of more than $7,500 a year.

Ohio trends

In Ohio, union representation *fell* by 0.5 percentage points, despite an additional 50,000 Ohioans joining the workforce from 2024 to 2025.[23] While union representation in Ohio remains higher than the national average, the difference grew smaller, and Ohio's change in union representation was worse than all but three other states'.

Figure 3

Ohio's lead over the nation in union representation is shrinking



Economic Policy Institute, State of Working America Data Library, "Union membership - Share represented by a union," 2026.

Source: Economic Policy Institute • Created with Datawrapper

Ohio's decline in union density was almost entirely experienced by men, as women increased their representation between 2024 and 2025.[24] While we don't have state-level industry data, we can assume that the same national trends that impacted unionization across the country were at play here in Ohio because changes in male and female representation mirror changes in specific gender-dominated fields. Healthcare, social assistance, and educational services industries predominantly employ women, and gains in those industries nationally are reflected in the increase in female union representation

[23] *Union Membership (Annual) News Release, Table 5. Bureau of Labor Statistics. February 18, 2026.*

[24] *Economic Policy Institute, State of Working America Data Library, "Union membership - Number represented by a union," 2026.*

in Ohio.[25] Similarly, national union representation losses in fields that predominantly employ men—mining, manufacturing, and transportation and utilities—are reflected in the decrease in male union representation in Ohio.

Organizing wins in Ohio's healthcare and social assistance industry support this interpretation. For example, Planned Parenthood of Greater Ohio Workers United won union recognition in early 2025 with contract ratifications in March. Metro Behavioral Health Nurses overwhelmingly voted in favor of joining the Ohio Nurses Association with the American Federation of Teachers (ONA-AFT). The momentum didn't stop in 2025: MetroHealth primary care providers, Nationwide Children's Hospital nurses, and UH physicians are organizing healthcare workers at hospital systems at the time of publication.

Public sector workers across the country and here in Ohio are responding to attacks on bargaining from the federal administration by getting organized as well. Despite an overall decline in union representation in Ohio, public sector employees came out of 2025 on top, adding a little over 15,500 workers to their union ranks.[26] The Cleveland Museum of Natural History workers and Delaware County District Library workers won union recognition in 2025 and are part of this trend.

Policy changes and recommendations

In 2025, the Trump Administration put collective bargaining rights at risk for more than one million federal workers.[27] The administration has also gutted the offerings of the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Service, preventing unions from accessing free mediation services to resolve labor disputes.

In Ohio, the very first bill introduced and passed during the current General Assembly, Senate Bill 1, added public college and university professors to the long list of public employees prohibited from striking – a list that previously only consisted of public safety occupations (i.e., police, correctional officers, and psychiatric attendants at mental health forensic facilities). If union faculty, or any of the public employees on the list, participate in a strike, S.B. 1 permits their employer to file for an injunction and disallows defense to be related to an unfair labor practice.

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[25] Nationally, women make up 75% of the education and health services supersector, of which healthcare and social assistance and educational services industries are categorized. Men make up 86% of the mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction, 71% of manufacturing, and 75% of the transportation and utilities industries. Between 2024 and 2025, women accounted for most of the increase in the education and health services supersector nationally and men accounted for majority of the increase in the mining, quarrying, and oil and gas extraction, manufacturing, and the transportation and utilities industries. See Table 17. Employed people by industry, sex, race, and occupation. Bureau of Labor Statistics. February 20, 2026.

[26] Economic Policy Institute. 2026. Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 2026.3.11, https://microdata.epi.org.

[27] Trump is the biggest union-buster in U.S. history. Patrick Oakford and Margaret Poydock. Economic Policy Institute. September 2, 2025.

S.B. 1 also creates a sense of fear and uncertainty for faculty around what they can and cannot say in their classrooms, negating years of effort to make Ohio's educational settings more inclusive. The bill language requires all student evaluations for public colleges and universities to include the question: "Does the faculty member create a classroom atmosphere free of political, racial, gender, and religious bias?" The language in the bill is so vague that enforcement can be unequally applied.

Rather than making it harder for workers to secure better wages, better benefits, and better treatment by forming or joining a union, federal and state legislators should protect and strengthen Ohio's unions by:

- Passing the Protecting America's Workforce Act. This piece of legislation would reinstate collective bargaining rights for federal workers. It has passed the U.S. House of Representatives and is with the Senate now.
- Preventing the passage of Ohio House Bills 510, 512, and 513, all of which weaken union and worker protections.
- Requiring first contracts to be bargained within a certain timeframe after union recognition, like Illinois did.
- Banning captive-audience meetings.