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Source: Labor Relations Week: All Issues > 2010 > 01/28/2010 > Lead Report > Unions: Unions Lost 771,000 Members in 2009, As Recession Eliminated Jobs, BLS Says

24 LRW 113

Unions

Unions Lost 771,000 Members in 2009, As Recession Eliminated Jobs, BLS Says

Unions lost 771,000 members in 2009, as the recession continued to take a toll on jobs, especially in manufacturing and construction, but the proportion of all wage and salary workers who belonged to a labor union held roughly steady at 12.3 percent, the Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Jan. 22.

The decline in the number of union members, to slightly more than 15.3 million workers, largely reflected an overall loss of 4.2 million jobs, following a smaller drop of 3.1 million jobs in 2008, when unions added 428,000 members, for a total of 16.1 million workers, BLS said.

Until last year, the union membership rate had trended slightly upward since 2006, when it fell to a record low 12.0 percent, from 20.1 percent in 1983, when BLS first began tracking the data.

In the private sector, which accounts for more than four-fifths of total nonfarm employment, the share of workers who were members of unions fell to 7.2 percent last year from 7.6 percent in 2008. By contrast, the union membership rate among government workers rose to 37.4 percent from 36.8 percent.

The number of union members employed in the private sector fell by 834,000 to 7.4 million workers in 2009 from nearly 8.3 million the prior year, while unions added about 64,000 members in government, raising the total to 7.9 million workers from 7.8 million workers in 2008.

As a result, a majority of union members for the first time last year was employed in government (52 percent).

The union membership figures are derived from the current population survey of U.S. households that BLS uses to compile its monthly report on the employment situation.

Solis Says Unions Benefit Workers

Labor Secretary Hilda Solis, in a Jan. 22 statement, said the latest report makes clear why the Obama administration supports passage of the proposed Employee Free Choice Act (H.R. 1409, S. 560).

The bill would amend the National Labor Relations Act to give workers the option to choose union representation by signing union authorization cards and also includes language providing for binding arbitration of first contracts and increasing penalties for employers that unlawfully discharge or discriminate against employees during organizing drives.

Solis cited the report's figures showing that union-represented workers have higher earnings

than those not represented. She said that "coupled with data showing that union members have access to better health care, retirement and leave benefits, these numbers make it clear that union jobs are good jobs."

In 2009, union-represented wage and salary workers usually earned about 21 percent more per week than those who were unrepresented, in both the private sector (\$845 versus \$697) and government (\$943 versus \$782), BLS said.

"As workers across the country have seen their real and nominal wages decline as a result of the recession, these numbers show a need for Congress to pass legislation to level the playing field to enable more American workers to access the benefits of union membership," Solis said.

"This is about what's happening to real wage earners across the country, not just unions or union membership," AFL-CIO President Trumka said.

In response to Solis' statement, Republicans in Congress who oppose the legislation criticized the administration's approach.

"[T]he Obama Administration continues to use America's troubled economy and the ongoing plight of American workers to promote the wishes of their special interest allies," said Rep. John Kline (R-Minn.), a member of the Education and Labor Committee.

EFCA "remains a threat to job creation, and it would be irresponsible for Washington Democrats to pursue this policy," Kline said.

Kline and other Republican committee members Jan. 21 held a forum where speakers argued that the administration's favoritism toward unions has stalled economic recovery by causing investors to withhold capital that could fund new jobs as they anticipate higher taxes and more stringent government regulations (see related story in *News*).

Labor Groups Seek Action

AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka said the loss in union membership is "another indicator of the terrible toll the economic crisis is taking on the nation's middle class."

"This is about what's happening to real wage earners across the country, not just unions or union membership," Trumka said in a statement on the group's website. "These numbers cry out for urgent, bold action by our leaders to invest in America and create good jobs."

AFL-CIO spokesman Josh Goldstein told BNA that unionized jobs have been hardest hit by the recession, notably in heavily organized sectors such as manufacturing and transportation, the traditional backbone of the economy.

He said now, more than ever, workers need Congress to pass EFCA so they will have the ability to bargain to make newly created jobs "good jobs" with decent wages and benefits.

Goldstein pointed to the shift in public sector workers making up more than half of union-represented workers for the first time as another reason why EFCA should be passed. State laws protecting the rights of workers to organize exist for public sector workers but not for private sector workers, he said.

EFCA would "give workers in the private sector the same rights" as those afforded to public sector workers, he said.

In a statement, American Rights at Work, a nonprofit advocacy organization supported by organized labor, said that part of the decline in the private sector could be attributed to "weak labor laws and a documented increase in anti-union retaliation by corporations against their employees."

"By contrast, stronger labor laws in the public sector meant gains in union density," ARAW said. "With laws in 13 states protecting the rights of public employees to form unions through majority sign-up, many public sector workers have a path to form a union without interference from their employer."

ARAW Executive Director Kimberly Freeman Brown said the 2009 union membership figures "show that while America's workers are struggling, they do choose unions where laws are in place to level the playing field."

"Unfortunately, union membership still stagnates because too many workers are denied the choice to form a union, both by employers and weak labor laws that won't hold unscrupulous corporations accountable," Brown said. She said enactment of legislation such as EFCA to restore workers' rights to form unions would "give workers a real chance to get a fair deal."

Change to Win spokesman Greg Denier told BNA Jan. 22 that despite the recession "union membership remains very strong," but added that "never have American workers needed unions more than now."

Denier noted that while union membership has decreased in some industries because of the recession, membership has increased in the service sector in industries such as health care and food, where unions are actively organizing.

While predicting that there will be increased organizing activity and increased union membership across all sectors of the economy because of the recession, Denier said he believes green jobs initiatives will be the "key to the revitalization of the labor movement."

Heritage Foundation Says Unionized Firms 'Do Poorly.'

James Sherk, a fellow on labor policy at the Heritage Foundation, argued that unionized jobs were hard-hit in part because unionized companies "do poorly in the marketplace and lose jobs relative to their nonunion competitors."

Among automakers, Toyota Motor Corp. and Honda Motor Co. have added jobs, while General Motors Co. and Chrysler Group LLC slashed payrolls, Sherk said in an analysis posted on the foundation's website. Three times as many union members now work at the U.S. Postal Service than work in the auto industry, he said.

Congress should recognize that because of the shift, unions "have narrowly self-interested reasons for lobbying for tax and spending increases" and should reject proposals that would increase union membership in government, such as requiring state and local governments that do not collectively bargain to do so, Sherk said.

Heaviest Job Losses in Construction, Manufacturing

The latest BLS figures show union members lost jobs in many industries, led by manufacturing (253,000), construction (237,000), information (108,000), and transportation and warehousing (80,000).

Including workers who are represented by unions but are not union members, the total number of union-represented workers fell from 17.8 million in 2008 to 16.9 million in 2009. The unionization rate, or the share of employed wage and salary workers represented by unions, held roughly steady at 13.6 percent.

By industry, the unionization rate declined in the manufacturing sector, from 12.3 percent in 2008 to 11.9 percent in 2009; in construction, from 16.2 percent to 15.0 percent; and in the information sector, from 13.7 percent to 11.2 percent.

Unionization in the transportation and utility industries held steady at 23.4 percent in 2009, the highest rate for any broad industry sector.

The unionization rate stayed about the same both in the wholesale and retail trade sector, at 5.8 percent, and in leisure and hospitality, at 3.6 percent, while edging down in education and health services, from 10.3 percent to 9.9 percent.

Within the public sector, local government, which includes several highly unionized occupations such as teachers, police officers, and firefighters, had the highest unionization rate (46.8 percent), while the federal government had the lowest rate (33.2 percent).

The BLS report also breaks down union membership by gender, race and ethnicity, and age, as well as by state.

By Larry Swisher

Michelle Amber contributed to this story.

*The report on union membership may be accessed at
<http://op.bna.com/dlrcases.nsf/r?Open=lswr-7zxmqq>.*

Contact us at <http://www.bna.com/contact/index.html> or call 1-800-372-1033

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