

U.S. union rates up substantially in 2008 for first time since 1970s, study shows

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Buoyed by a rising tide in California in general and Southern California in particular, U.S. unionization levels rose substantially this year, defying a decades-long trend of decline, according to a report by UCLA's Institute for Research on Labor and Employment.

"The State of the Unions in 2008: A Profile of Union Membership in Los Angeles, California and the Nation" shows unionization rates nationwide rising half a percentage point over the 2007 level, to 12.6 percent of all U.S. civilian workers in 2008. The rate rose one-tenth of a percentage point between 2006 and 2007. Prior to that, the last time U.S. unionization rates registered an increase was in 1979.

"This is good news for organized labor," said Ruth Milkman, lead author of the report and outgoing director of the UCLA labor institute. "It shows that despite an extremely hostile environment, unions can grow."

Milkman and UCLA sociology graduate student Bongoh Kye analyzed U.S. Current Population Survey data on union membership for California, Los Angeles and the nation. They report unionization rates by race, immigration status, gender, age and education for the first six months of 2008. This year's report and earlier such studies of unionization data going back to 1996 are available at www.irle.ucla.edu/research/unionmembership.html .

According to the report, in the first half of 2008, the number of U.S. workers on the membership rolls of labor unions increased by 583,300

over the 2007 average.

Fueling the nationwide increase was the recent growth in unionization in California, which currently accounts for 16 percent of all the nation's union members, more than any other state. California's unionization rate in 2008 is 17.8 percent, up from 16.7 percent in 2007 and 15.7 percent in 2006.

The Los Angeles metro area, which includes Los Angeles, Riverside, Orange, Ventura and Santa Barbara counties, helped drive California's union growth. Nearly half of California's 2,633,600 union members — or 1,227,600 workers — live in the Los Angeles metro area, according to the UCLA study, which is released annually on Labor Day. Despite being perceived historically as anti-union, Los Angeles and its surrounding metro area have recently seen increases in unionization rates, which rose to 17 percent in 2008 from 15.9 percent in 2007 and 15.2 percent in 2006.

"In a very real way, Los Angeles and California continue to serve as strong growth engines for organized labor nationally," said Milkman, a UCLA professor of sociology. "The labor movement here is in much better shape than in much of the rest of the country. If this year's nationwide increase proves to be a lasting trend, historians will look back and see the leading edge of that growth here in the West."

The region's relatively high unionization rates are in keeping with its high level of public-sector unionization, as well as the fact that the sector in which unionization has declined most sharply nationally — manufacturing — has historically been less important to the region's economy than was the case in other parts of the nation, the report states.

In the first half of 2008, unionization rates in manufacturing were 10.1 percent in Los Angeles and 9.9 percent in California. By comparison,

unionization rates in educational services were 47.3 percent in Los Angeles and 49 percent in California; in public administration, they were 56.9 percent in Los Angeles and 55.3 percent in California.

While the public sector continues to account for the largest share of unionized workers overall, the study found an unexpected uptick in private-sector unionization in all three geographical jurisdictions. Although the increase in the state and nation was quite a bit smaller, Los Angeles' private-sector unionization rate increased from 8.8 percent in 2007 to 10 percent today.

"One component of this growth is recent union organizing, like the Service Employees International Union's successful security officer campaign here in L.A., but the region's unionization rates are affected by many other factors," Milkman noted. "If jobs are lost in nonunion sectors due to an economic downturn, as we've seen recently in residential construction, for example, that can lead to an increase in the unionization rate, if other things are stable."

The appeal of unionism to workers themselves is easy to understand. Average hourly earnings are about \$2.50 higher for union members than for nonunion workers in the U.S. today, the study found. Union members also are far more likely to have access to benefits like retirement plans, medical insurance and paid leave than their nonunion counterparts.

Although state and local data on benefits are not available for 2008, nationwide, 90 percent of union members had access to retirement benefits, compared with only 61 percent of nonunion workers; 91 percent of union members had access to medical coverage, compared with 70 percent of nonunion workers; and 57 percent of union members had employer-provided paid-leave benefits, compared with only 38 percent of nonunion workers.

While the Los Angeles metro area may be home to the largest concentration of union members in the state, it does not boast the highest unionization rate. As in the past, Sacramento lays claim to that distinction, followed by San Francisco, Los Angeles and Fresno, the report states. San Diego has the state's lowest unionization rate, at 13.4 percent overall, with only 7.7 percent in the private sector.

As has been the case for decades, unionization rates are considerably higher among older workers than younger ones, the researchers noted.

"This age variation reflects the fact that unionized jobs, on average, provide workers with substantially higher wages than do nonunion jobs," Kye said. "Higher wages are typically associated with lower turnover, which generates an older workforce over time. And unionized jobs offer more job security than nonunion jobs, which further reduces turnover and adds to the increase in the average age of unionized workers."

In addition to being older, unionized workers on average are more educated than their nonunion counterparts, the researchers found. In fact, the more education workers have, the higher their unionization rates tend to be.

"Whereas decades ago, the archetypal union member was a blue collar worker with limited education, today mid-level professionals are much more likely to be unionized than anyone else, especially in sectors like educational service and public administration, which both have relatively large numbers of college-educated workers." Kye said.

The high unionization rates in educational services and public administration also mean that more women than men are being represented by unions in 2008 in California and Los Angeles. Women are more likely than men to work in these fields.

Teachers and other educational workers account for more than one-quarter of all unionized workers in the city, state and nation, and workers employed in public administration — such as librarians, social workers, and city and county clerical staff — account for more than an eighth of union members in all three jurisdictions.

The highly unionized public sector accounts for two other key demographic trends in unionization. African Americans, who are relatively highly concentrated in public-sector employment, have the highest unionization rate of any racial or ethnic group. And while the gap has recently narrowed, U.S.-born workers have a higher unionization rate (13 percent nationally) than foreign-born workers (10.1 percent), who are less likely to be employed in the public sector. Foreign-born U.S. citizens, as well as immigrants who arrived in the U.S. before 1980, however, have rates of unionization similar to U.S.-born workers.

Provided by UCLA

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