

# Recession? What recession? Unionization up on state, local levels

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Against all odds, organized labor managed to make new inroads during the economic upheaval of the past year, new findings from UCLA's Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE) suggest.

From July 2008 to June 2009, unions netted 24,904 new members in the Southland and 131,206 in California, according to the findings. Union density — which measures the concentration of unionized members in a workforce — also rose, inching up by eight-tenths of a percentage point in the five Southern California counties studied and by one percentage point in the state overall.

"These changes are really substantial," said Lauren Appelbaum, research director of the IRLE and the study's lead author. "The proportion of the workforce that is unionized has increased in the Southland by 5 percent over the past year and 12 percent over the past two years, and in California by 6 percent over the past year and 14 percent over the past two years."

Even on the national level, where actual union membership dipped, last year's gains in union density — the first in decades — held steady or possibly increased slightly.

"Usually with an [economic downturn](#), you see the Michigan story, where unionization gets clobbered," said Chris Tilly, the IRLE's director and a UCLA professor of urban planning, referring to the recession in the early 1980s that decimated the American [auto industry](#). "What we're

having in this recession is a different story. Here is a horrific downturn, and the rate of unionization is increasing."

The findings are contained in the IRLE's fifth annual report on the state of organized labor. Based on labor figures in the U.S. Current Population Survey conducted by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and the U.S. Bureau of the Census, "The State of the Unions in 2009" tracks year-to-year changes in unionization in five metropolitan regions in California, the state as a whole and the nation. For the purposes of the study, researchers included Los Angeles, Riverside, Orange, Ventura and San Bernardino counties in the Southland.

This year's detailed analysis and earlier unionization data going back to 2005 are available at <http://irle.ucla.edu>.

As would be expected in a recession, union membership dropped in manufacturing across the region, state and country, according to the study authors.

"Job losses in manufacturing appear to have led to an absolute decline in the number of union members working, simply because there are fewer people employed in these traditionally unionized jobs," Appelbaum said.

As in the past, women had a higher unionization rate over the past year than men in the Southland and in California. Not surprisingly for a downturn that has been called a "mancession" for the disproportionate toll that it has taken on male workers, union membership and unionization rates for men dropped across the nation.

However, men locally and statewide defied that trend, stepping up their unionization rates and absolute numbers since last summer. Over the past year, male union membership grew almost twice as fast as female membership in the Southland, and four times as fast as female

membership in California.

"The high-profile union campaign to organize security officers and the increases among union membership in the construction industry in California and Los Angeles yielded large increases for unions among a largely male workforce," Appelbaum said.

Across the country, the picture for male union membership was not as rosy. Nationwide, the number of male union members fell by 154,362, the IRLE found.

"It's not like men across the country are leaving unions in droves," Appelbaum said. "The recession is eliminating their jobs, just as it's eliminating other jobs, both union and nonunion."

Other highlights:

- While unionization remained concentrated in the public sector, Southland and California unions made gains in the private sector, both in terms of absolute numbers and density. Across the nation, however, unions lost ground in the private sector.
- While unionization remained concentrated among workers with at least some college education, Southland and California unions made inroads among high school graduates and even among workers with only some high school education.
- In construction and in transportation and utilities, unionization increased locally and statewide, but not nationwide.

Union membership in health care dropped in the Southland and the United States, but rose statewide amid prominent unionizing efforts on

the part of Service Employees International Union; the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees; and the National Union of Healthcare Workers.

The findings are consistent with long-term unionization trends in California and the Southland. For the past four years, unionization rates have steadily climbed in the Southland and California, outpacing the nation, the IRLE has found.

As in the past, the Los Angeles metropolitan area laid claim in 2008<sup>22</sup> to the largest number of union members in the state, with a total of 1,237,393 members, but it did not boast the highest unionization rate — the Sacramento metropolitan area again held that distinction, followed by the metropolitan areas of San Francisco, Fresno, Los Angeles and San Diego.

Despite the loss in California of 22,200 government jobs over the last year, the public sector continued to enjoy much higher rates of unionization than the private sector, the IRLE found.

The appeal of unionism to workers themselves is easy to understand. In the United States today, average hourly earnings are about \$4 more for union workers than non-union workers.

Source: University of California - Los Angeles

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