

## Unions continue to take a beating in post-recession climate, study shows

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The Great Recession and ensuing job crisis continue to take a toll on union membership, according to UCLA's annual report on organized labor.

From July 1, 2010, to June 30, 2011, unionization rates remained essentially flat in Los Angeles but fell close to a percentage point in California and tumbled to historic lows nationwide, researchers from the university's Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE) found.

"The trend is bad for unions, it's bad for workers and, because it's a reflection of a jobless recovery, it's bad for the country," said Chris Tilly, director of the IRLE and a professor of [urban planning](#) at UCLA's Luskin School of Public Affairs.

"The State of the Unions in 2011: A Profile of Union Membership in Los Angeles, California and the Nation," publishes on Labor Day, Sept. 5.

The report is based on an analysis of the U.S. Current Population Survey, conducted by the U.S. [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) and the U.S. [Census Bureau](#). The IRLE report tracks year-to-year changes in unionization for the nation, California and the Los Angeles metropolitan area, including Santa Ana, Riverside, Long Beach, Thousand Oaks, Ventura, San Bernardino, Oxnard and Ontario.

The proportion of the workforce that is unionized in the Los Angeles metro area now stands at 16.4 percent, down from 16.5 percent last year, a drop that did not prove to be statistically significant. Even with its lackluster 2010<sup>Q4</sup> showing, the Los Angeles metro area accounts for nearly half of the union members in California, which has the highest number of union members of any state in the nation.

"Los Angeles-area unions are much more active in organizing new members than the average union nationwide, and they have been able to win a high level of political support, which helps them gain and retain members even in difficult times," Tilly said.

California, however, did not fare as well. Statewide unionization rates fell from 17.6 percent in 2009<sup>Q4</sup> to 16.9 percent in 2010<sup>Q4</sup> as the year's job growth managed to make only a small dent against the job losses California has experienced in the past four-and-a-half years.

"The 220,000 or so jobs recovered in California in 2011 were simply not enough to overcome the effects of the 1.3 million jobs that were lost in the state from the start of the recession in December of 2007 through September of 2010, when California reported its lowest number of jobs since the economic downturn," said Lauren Appelbaum, the report's lead author and research director of the IRLE.

Yet even with the significant drop, California's 2010<sup>Q4</sup> unionization rate did not fall below the state's average for the prior decade, which also was 16.9 percent.

But for the nation, the hit taken by unions had no upside in 2010<sup>Q4</sup>. At 11.8 percent, the proportion of American workers who belong to unions is the lowest it has been since current reporting procedures began in 1983 and probably before that as well, the researchers said.

"At no time since the Great Depression has the country experienced such a low level of union participation by its workers," Appelbaum said.

As with last year, losses in 2010 came primarily in the private sector, the researchers found. This was particularly the case at the California state level, where private sector unionization rates dropped from 9.7 percent in 2009 to 8.9 percent in 2010.

"The industries that were first hit by the recession were industries that were not highly unionized, such as real estate, residential construction and financial institutions," Appelbaum said. "As the recession continued, job losses spread to other industries, including those with higher unionization rates. Technically we're in a recovery now, but employment is still lagging, and most of the new jobs are not unionized."

The Fresno metro area was especially hard hit. There, private sector unionization plummeted from 11.1 percent in 2009 to 5.6 percent in 2010, the researchers found.

The recession has also caught up with workers in non-residential construction, who are more likely to be unionized than their counterparts in residential construction. Immediately following the crash of 2008, employment in non-residential construction did not evaporate as quickly as it did in residential construction, thanks in part to federal economic stimulus dollars. But over the past year, membership in the unionized construction industry fell across the board. This was especially the case in California, where these unionization rates fell from 6.1 percent in 2009 to 5.0 percent in 2010.

"The stimulus package went into infrastructure. That, to some extent, was propping up non-residential construction, and that prop is pretty much spent now," Tilly said. "But the economy hasn't picked up enough yet for people to say, 'Let's build a new mall or a new office building.'"

The losses in unionized construction jobs, which are more often held by men than women, undoubtedly helped fuel the continuing drop in male unionization rates observed by the IRLE team. Between 2009<sup>Q1</sup> and 2010<sup>Q1</sup>, male unionization decreased locally, statewide and across the nation, although the local drop did not prove to be statistically significant. Unlike last year, however, the drop did not appear to be due to rising unemployment among men.

"Initially, the drop in male unionization following the recession was due to the 'mancession.' Now, the jobs that are coming back increasingly are being filled by men, but the jobs aren't unionized, so that makes the percentage of men who are unionized smaller in the entire work force," Appelbaum explained.

Either way, though, the long-term gender gap in unionization rates in Los Angeles and California continued to widen as female workers joined unions — or retained their union memberships — more frequently than their male counterparts. Across the nation, where a smaller proportion of women than men are unionized, the drop in male unionization rates had a different impact — the gender gap shrunk.

The only other industry that saw a drop in unionization across the board — at the local, state and national levels — over the past year was wholesale and retail trade, a finding that did not surprise Appelbaum.

"Nobody has any money to buy anything, so of course these jobs suffer," she said.

Two other industries took a beating, although not to the same extent. While unionization rates in manufacturing and hospitality held steady at the national level, they experienced a decline locally and across the state. Manufacturing took the steepest fall.

The only across-the-board increase came in an area where even financially pinched consumers are hard-pressed to cut back: health care and social services. The growth was especially strong locally, where it rose from 11.6 percent in 2009 to 14.2 percent in 2010. Public administration also saw an increase, but only in Los Angeles and California. Across the nation, these [unionization rates](#) were flat.

As in the past, [union membership](#) continues to carry significant benefits, the researchers found. Unionized workers earned more per hour, on average, than their non-union counterparts in Los Angeles (\$5.10 more), California (\$4.20 more) and the U.S. (\$4.40 more). With job growth anemic and inevitable hurdles to organizing at newly formed companies, the researchers are pessimistic that more workers will enjoy these benefits any time soon.

"The way the economy recovery is unfolding, I think next year's figures will be worse," Tilly said.

Provided by University of California - Los Angeles

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