

# New report shows greater interest in labor unions, especially among young workers

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A new report from the University of California San Diego School of

Global Policy and Strategy reveals significant changes in support for labor unions among U.S. workers.

The [report](#), published by the Economics Policy Institute, delves into the evolving attitudes toward unions and identifies three major shifts that are occurring among U.S. workers: a recent, marked decline in opposition to labor unions, a rise of workers who are interested in—but unsure about—unions and an emerging generation gap in attitudes toward unionization between younger and older workers.

"While we compared levels of support for workplace unionization across workers in [different industries](#) and demographic subgroups, the biggest trend we see is that a large generational divide is emerging that was not apparent even a few years ago," said John Ahlquist, professor at the School of Global Policy and Strategy and co-author of the [report](#).

"Workers 30 and under are far more likely than [older workers](#) to report both support for and uncertainty about unionization."

He added that the research shows a remarkable shift in [public opinion](#) toward unions. A significant and growing share of workers express ambivalence, indicating they are unsure whether they would vote for union representation. This group, dubbed the "union curious," represents a pivotal demographic in the future of labor movements.

"The rise of the 'union curious' highlights both the challenges and opportunities facing unions today, as they seek to convert ambivalence into active support and organization," Ahlquist said.

"Unions need to engage and educate workers, especially the younger generation, to harness this newfound interest."

**'Essential workers,' especially younger ones, largely**

## **express dissatisfaction with their careers**

The report is based on a 2022 survey from the Worker Empowerment Research Network (WERN), focusing on about 2,500 frontline workers in five specific low-wage industries post-COVID-19: health care, hospitality, retail, telecommunications and warehousing. These workers' opinions on unions are important because these sectors experienced the most upheaval during COVID and there has been major union activity within these industries.

Unlike other surveys with broad national samples, this survey zeroes in on [job satisfaction](#), workplace issues (e.g., wage theft, harassment, scheduling instability) and workers' attitudes toward unionization.

The results of this [survey](#) were compared to other similar surveys conducted recently and in prior decades to present a comprehensive analysis of public attitudes toward labor unions.

Comparisons reveal that outright opposition to unionization has dramatically declined. This is especially true for workers surveyed in five specific low-wage industries.

"Bad jobs increase the likelihood of voting for the union and reduce both uncertainty and resistance to unionization," the authors write. "A [worker](#) who experienced four different problems at work has double the expected probability of voting for a union compared with a worker who reported no major problems at work."

## **Recent union activity does not equate to a rise in union membership**

The report also contextualizes these findings within broader trends,

including the recent surge in strikes and significant collective bargaining agreements that have achieved notable wage increases and nonwage breakthroughs in various industries.

"While there has been more union activity and some successes, such as the writers' strike in Hollywood as well as recent wins for the United Automobile Workers and Teamsters unions, the actual number of workers who are members of [labor unions](#), are represented by a labor union, or working in their union contracts has continued to decline," Ahlquist said.

He added the report has interesting implications for the future of work. "When you look at what [young people](#) are saying now and how that will project that into the future, they show they have some demands and presumably a level of dissatisfaction with what they're seeing in their careers in these five industries," he said.

"What that turns into over time is dependent on how humans react and how employers and the economy evolve."

Co-authors of the report include Jake Grumbach of the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley and Thomas Kochan of the MIT Sloan School of Management.

**More information:** John S. Ahlquist et al, Rise of the 'union curious:' Support for unionization among America's frontline workers."

[www.epi.org/publication/rise-of-the-union-curious/](http://www.epi.org/publication/rise-of-the-union-curious/)

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