

Union membership still falling, Labor Department finds

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While Hawaii and New York boast healthy rates of union concentration — one in four members of the states' labor forces is a union member — that figure shrivels to less than one in 20 in Virginia, Georgia and the Carolinas. Nationwide, union membership hit a new low, too. Part of the reason for the drop in union participation is the continued downsizing in manufacturing, which once epitomized union membership but whose share of union membership has collapsed because of layoffs and buyouts. Although unions are organizing new workers, they haven't made up for the losses in heavy industry.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics calculates total union membership at 15.4 million, bringing the percentage of employees in unions to 12 percent, down from 12.5 percent in 2005. Those figures contrast with 20 percent in 1983 and 35 percent in the 1950s. The share of private-sector workers in unions slipped to 7.4 percent — the lowest percentage since the early 1900s.

Why aren't more workers in unions? It's not lack of interest, or lack of trying on the part of unions. The AFL-CIO cites polling results showing 53 percent of nonunion workers — some 60 million Americans — would vote to join a union if they could. What stops them? Employer resistance and anti-union laws in almost half of the states.

The Employee Free Choice Act, now facing a threatened filibuster in the Senate, would give workers the right to unionize through signing pro-union cards. It's called "card check." Business groups prefer secret-ballot elections, which are time-consuming and can frustrate even the best organizing drives through employer intimidation of workers and the firing of union supporters.

In a recent press statement, AFL-CIO President John Sweeney wrote, "The corporate fight against the Employee Free Choice Act is about the dollars. Joining together to bargain for better wages and benefits is the best opportunity for working people to get ahead. Union workers are paid an average of 29 percent more than nonunion workers and are 62 percent more likely to have employer-provided health coverage and four times more likely to have pensions.

"So when you see the high-priced ads coming out attacking the Employee Free Choice Act, chalk it up to a bunch of corporate special interests hell-bent on protecting their profits at the cost of basic fairness, economic opportunity and America's middle class."

The New York Times, Jan. 26-27
AFL-CIO Alert, Feb. 5