

Union card is still a worker's best investment

Forget the lottery or stock market. Carrying a union card is still the best investment a worker can make, according to the latest figures released by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

The median weekly earnings of full-time union members in 2005 was \$801 — about 29 percent more than nonunion workers' pay (\$622). The difference was even greater among Hispanic union workers (\$713), who made 50 percent more than Hispanic nonunion workers.

And BLS figures show the increase in union members' wages last year was nearly double that of the nonunion — 2.6 percent compared to only 1.6 percent for nonunion workers.

On top of that, a March 2005 National Compensation Survey shows that union workers enjoy better pensions, health and dental insurance, with less out-of-pocket costs.

According to the government survey, 85 percent of union workers participate in pension and health plans, compared to 46 percent of nonunion workers. Seventy-three percent of union workers are offered a defined pension plan by their employers, compared to only 16 percent of the nonunion.

As for out-of-pocket expenses for family health insurance premiums, nonunion workers pay twice as much as unionized workers — 16 percent of the premium cost vs. 32 percent.

Workers are beginning to realize the value of a union card, as membership grew nationally by 213,000 last year (the first increase since 1999). Still, the percentage of union workers remained flat at 12.5 percent — or 15.7 million members. BLS said an

additional 1.5 million people were represented by a union, but were not members.

Last year, women union members' numbers grew by 222,000. The percentage of female union members rose to 11.3 percent in 2005 from 11.1 percent, while male union membership fell to 13.5 percent of workers from 13.8 percent.

In the private-sector, unionists were 7.8 percent of the workforce, while in the public-sector, workers made up 36.8 percent.

In Oregon, union membership was 213,000, down 11,000 from 2004. Union members made up 14.5 percent of the state's workforce. BLS said an additional 18,000 workers were represented by a union, but weren't members). These numbers continue a long-term downward trend in "union density." Comparatively, union workers made up 22.3 percent (222,900) of the Oregon workforce in 1983, the first year that comparable data was available.

Nationwide, in 1983 there were 17.7 million union members (20.1 percent of the workforce).

In Washington State, the number of union members climbed 13,000 to 523,000, but overall union density dropped from 19.3 percent in 2004 to 19.1 percent in 2005. The state added more than 100,000 jobs last year.

Washington continues to rank 6th highest in the nation in terms of the unionization rate. Only New York (26.1 percent), Hawaii (25.8 percent), Alaska (22.8 percent), Michigan and New Jersey (20.5 percent each) have higher rates. Oregon ranked 14th na-

tionwide.

The least-unionized states were South Carolina (2.3 percent), North Carolina (2.9 percent), Arkansas and Virginia (3.3 percent each) and Utah (3.9 percent).

Surveys by the national AFL-CIO indicate that more than half of American workers (57 percent) say they would join a union today if they could.

But workers who try often face an array of employer tactics to suppress their efforts. According to Cornell University's Kate Brofenbrenner, 25 percent of employers illegally fire workers trying to unionize, 75 percent hire outside consultants to run anti-union campaigns, 92 percent force workers to attend closed-door anti-union meetings and, even when workers are successful in forming a union, in one-third of the instances, employers never negotiate a contract.

"In a political climate that's hostile to workers' rights, these numbers illustrate the extraordinary will of workers to gain a voice on the job despite enormous obstacles," said AFL-CIO President John Sweeney.

At the AFL-CIO's request, members of Congress last year introduced the Employee Free Choice Act. The legislation would require employers to recognize a union after a majority of

workers sign cards authorizing union representation. It also would provide for mediation and arbitration of first-contract disputes, and authorize stronger penalties for violation of the law when workers seek a union.

The bill has 208 co-sponsors in the House, including all 10 Democratic U.S. representatives in Oregon and Washington, and 42 co-sponsors in the Senate, including the three Democratic senators from Oregon and Washington.

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BENNETT HARTMAN MORRIS & KAPLAN, LLP

Attorneys at Law

- Personal Injury • Labor
- Workers' Compensation
- Employment • Domestic Relations

111 SW Fifth Avenue, Suite 1650, Portland, Oregon 97204
503 227-4600

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