

Union card is still a good investment

• In almost every occupation and demographic, union members increased their advantage in earnings over their nonunion colleagues in 2006. The median weekly earnings figure for union members nationwide — that point at which half are above and half are below — was \$833 in 2006, up by \$32 (3.85 percent) in one year. The median for nonunion workers rose by \$20 to \$642 in 2006. The median for all workers also rose by \$20, to \$671.

• Union members had an edge in median weekly earnings in factories (\$755 to \$692 for nonunion), construction (\$969 to \$610), retail (\$583 to \$518) and almost everywhere else in 2006. Retail trade was the sole occupation where the median for union members slid (\$7), while the median for nonunion workers rose (\$5).

• In 2006, the union membership rate was higher for men (13 percent) than for women (10.9 percent). The gap between their rates has narrowed considerably since 1983, when the rate for men was about 10 percentage points higher than the rate for women. This narrowing occurred because the union membership rate for men declined more rapidly than the rate for women.

• Black workers were more likely to be union members (14.5 percent) than were whites (11.7 percent), Asians (10.4 percent), or Hispanics (9.8 percent).

• Among age groups, union membership rates were highest among workers 45 to 64 years old (16 percent) and were lowest among those ages 16 to 24 (4.4 percent).

Union membership in U.S. falls by 326,000

Washington State bucks the trend with a 26,000-member increase

The number of workers in the United States belonging to a union fell by 326,000 in 2006 to 15.4 million — or 12 percent of the workforce — according to the latest statistics released by the U.S. Department of Labor.

In Oregon, union membership fell from 213,000 in 2005 to an estimated 211,000 last year. That's 13.8 percent of the workforce.

Washington State bucked the trend, increasing its ranks by 26,000 members last year to an estimated 549,000 members, or 19.8 percent of the workforce.

Washington now ranks fifth-highest in the nation in terms of union density, trailing only Hawaii (24.7 percent), New York (24.4 percent), Alaska (22.2 percent), and New Jersey (20.1 percent).

Among the five states reporting union membership rates below 5 percent in 2006, North Carolina and South Carolina continued to post the lowest rates (3.3 percent each). The next lowest rates were recorded in Virginia (4 percent), Georgia (4.4 percent), and Texas (4.9 percent).

Nationally, the public sector still has the highest number of organized workers, at 36.2 percent. In the private sectors only 7.4 percent of workers are represented.

The largest decrease in union membership rates occurred in manufacturing, where union membership dropped 1.3 percentage points to just 11.7 percent of manufacturing workers. For the first time since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began tracking these trends, and likely for the first time in U.S. history, union membership rates were

lower in manufacturing (11.7 percent) than in the rest of the economy (12.0 percent), reported the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

The national unionization rate has steadily declined from a high of 20.1 percent in 1983, the first year for which comparable union data are available.

"While I'm very encouraged that more workers in Washington State have organized to gain a voice at work and win strong union contracts, this news about declining national membership is another troubling sign that America's middle class is struggling," said Rick Bender, president of the Washington State Labor Council, AFL-CIO. "It's bad news for all workers, not just union members, when fewer of us have a contract to protect our living standards from being eroded away."

He said the factors that have contributed to the national decline include the outsourcing of jobs, the decline of America's once-powerful manufacturing sector and the enormous difficulty workers face when trying to form or join unions to improve their lives.

A recent survey by Peter D. Hart Research Associates shows that the public support of unions is at a 25-year high — 65 percent approve of unions while only 25 percent disapprove. More than half of all workers say they would join a union today if given the chance.

According to last week's Department of Labor report, full-time wage

and salary workers who were union members in 2006 had median weekly earnings of \$833, compared with a median of \$642 for wage and salary workers who were not represented by unions. Unionized workers also are more likely to have better employer-paid health insurance and pensions.

The biggest obstacle, Bender said, is that "too many unscrupulous employers routinely fire, harass and intimidate workers who express interest in joining unions — even though that's supposed to be illegal."

Weak labor laws have allowed union-busting consultants to make the union election process a virtual minefield. Studies have found that among employers faced with union organizing campaigns:

- 30 percent will fire pro-union workers.

- 49 percent will threaten to close a worksite, but only 2 percent actually do.

- 51 percent will coerce workers into opposing unions with bribery or favoritism.

- 82 percent will hire high-priced union-busting consultants to fight union organizing drives.

- 91 percent will force employees to attend one-on-one anti-union meetings with their supervisors.

To combat this, unions are lobbying for legislation at both federal and state levels that would allow workers to form a union by simply signing authorization cards.

The Employee Free Choice Act will be re-introduced in Congress later this year.

Last year, the EFCA was co-sponsored by 215 U.S. representatives and 44 senators.

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