

Despite fall in union membership

Pacific Northwest ranks among top 10 in union density

The Great Recession has pushed down union membership by 1.3 million over the last two years — nearly double the total gains unions made in 2007-08, according to the latest report from the U.S. Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS).

The number of union members dropped 612,000 to 14.7 million in 2010. The rate of union membership dropped to 11.9 percent, compared to 12.3 percent the previous year.

In the state-by-state breakdown, Washington held its No. 4 ranking in terms of union density, with the state's 552,000 union members accounting for 19.4 percent of the overall workforce — nearly one in five Washington work-

ers. Only New York (24.2 percent), Alaska (22.9 percent) and Hawaii (21.8 percent) have higher unionization rates than Washington.

Oregon's 245,000 union members puts it 10th nationally in union density — at 16.2 percent.

States ahead of Oregon in union density are California (17.5 percent), New Jersey (17.1 percent), Connecticut (16.7 percent), Michigan (16.5 percent), and Rhode Island (16.4 percent).

According to BLS statistics, total jobs in Oregon increased by 44,000 in 2010, while union membership fell by 5,000.

Total jobs in Washington dropped 10,000 in 2010, but the number of

union members dropped 22,000.

Those numbers mirrored a national trend of lower union density in nearly every state in the country.

BLS union data analyst Jim Walker told Press Associates Union News Service the recession particularly hit hard at three more-densely unionized sectors: manufacturing, construction and local government.

"Also, men dominate those industries — especially manufacturing and construction — and they have a higher share of union membership and were particularly hard hit by the downturn," he said.

By contrast, Walker said more lightly unionized sectors, including

health care and hospitality, were not as hard hit by the recession. As a result, 6.9 percent of private sector workers are unionized, compared to 36.2 percent of public workers. Public sector unionists outnumber private sector unionists by 500,000.

Some private sector industries are more unionized than others, however: transportation and utilities (21.8 percent), telecommunications (15.8 percent), and construction (13.1 percent).

Since 1983, when BLS first started keeping comparable data, union density among men has declined by 12.1 percent, to 12.6 percent in 2010. The rate for women has dropped 3.5 percent in 27 years, and 0.2 percent from 2009

to 2010. It's now 11.1 percent. Men were also a larger share of unionists in 2010 (54 percent) and in 2009 (55 percent) than their share of the total workforce (51 percent).

There were some states where union membership increased, with all of them in the South or West. But even there, the recession's impact appeared.

For instance, BLS reported that North Carolina is still last in union density, though it edged up from 3.1 percent and 115,000 unionists in 2009 to 3.2 percent and 117,000 last year.

The biggest percentage gain was in Kentucky, which added 3,000 unionists, to 100,000, and density rose from 13.9 percent to 14.8 percent.

The wage difference between union and nonunion workers hit a key milestone: Precisely \$200 a week. Unionized workers had a median wage of \$917 per week compared to \$717 for nonunion workers. The median is the point where half the population is above and half is below the figure. The union/nonunion gap widened by \$2 in one year.

And union women still had a significantly higher median wage than their nonunion sisters — and were closer to parity with men. In 2010, union women earned a median weekly

As union membership falls, middle class incomes shrink

By KARLA WALTER & DAVID MADLAND

Union membership is at record lows. Critics claim that unions are not important to the modern economy — with only 12 percent of workers currently unionized — but the truth is that if you care about the middle class, you need to care about unions.

The middle class is markedly stronger when workers join together in unions. As the chart at right demonstrates, the sharp decline over the past 40 years in the percentage of workers organized in unions has been associated with an equally sharp drop in the share of the nation's income going to the middle class — those in the second, third and fourth income quintiles.

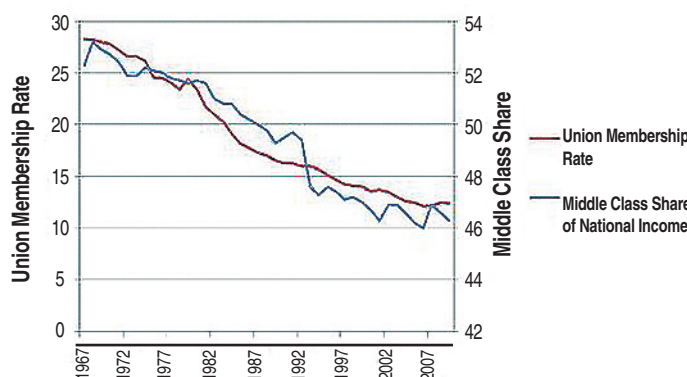
The power of unions to create prosperity for working families is well recognized: Organized labor is one of the few voices for the economic interests of the middle class in our government. Unions were key to creating and protecting the social safety net (including Social Security and Medicare) and winning major legislative victories for working families such as the Equal Pay

Act, the Civil Rights Act, the Family and Medical Leave Act and — most recently — the Affordable Care Act.

And unions ensure that workers are paid fair wages. Unionized workers today make significantly more than their nonunion counterparts — about \$2.50 more per hour than an otherwise comparable worker in the typical state, ac-

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