

Union membership holds steady in 2017

America's union membership rate held steady in 2017, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Jan. 19: 10.7 percent of wage and salary workers were union members, the same as 2016. Union members were 6.5 percent private-sector workers and 34.4 percent of public-sector.

With the work force growing, the hold-steady percentage meant 262,000 more union members: 14.8 million altogether, 7.2 million in the public sector and 7.6 million workers in the private sector. Another 1.6 million workers were covered by a union contract but were not members, a situation that's more common in right-to-work states, or with "fair share" paying non-members in the public sector.

Workers belonging to unions in Oregon edged up by 34,000, to 262,000, according to the BLS report. In Washington state, union membership grew by 45,000 from the previous year, to 584,000.

BY THE NUMBERS

U.S. workers in a union 10.7%

Public-sector workers in a union 34.4%

Private-sector workers in a union 6.5%

Total U.S. union members 14.8 million

Public sector union members 7.2 million

Private sector union members 7.6 million

The data also show:

- **Gender:** Union membership rates are still slightly higher among men than women (11.4 to 10 percent.) but the gap has narrowed considerably since 1983, when rates for men and women were 24.7 and 14.6 percent.
- **Race:** Union membership rates are slightly higher among Black workers (12.6 percent) than White (10.6 percent), Hispanic (9.3 percent), or Asian (8.9 percent) workers.
- **Age:** Union membership rates continued to be highest among workers ages 45 to 64, 13.2 - 13.5 percent, compared with

4.7 percent of workers age 16-24, and 9.4 percent of those 25 to 34.

Average weekly earnings for union members were 26 percent higher than for nonunion workers (\$1,041 versus \$829). Some of that difference comes from the fact that union members tend to be older, work at larger firms, and are concentrated in high-wage geographic regions, industries and occupations.

New York continued to have the highest union membership rate (23.8 percent), followed by

Hawaii (21.3), Washington (18.8) and Alaska (18.1). Oregon was number 12, with 14.9 percent unionized. California had 15.5 percent.

South Carolina continued to have the lowest (2.6 percent) followed by North Carolina (3.4 percent) and Utah (3.9 percent). Idaho, with 4.8 percent, was 9th lowest.

Within the public sector, the union membership rate was highest in local government (40.1 percent), which employs

many workers in heavily unionized occupations, such as teachers, police officers, and firefighters.

Private-sector industries with high unionization rates included utilities (23.0 percent), transportation and warehousing (17.3 percent), telecommunications (16.1 percent), and construction (14.0 percent).

Industries with the lowest unionization rates were finance (1.1 percent), food services and drinking places (1.4 percent), and professional and technical services (1.7 percent).

The figures are come from a monthly survey conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau of about 60,000 households that asks for information on employment among the nation's civilian non-institutional population age 16 and over. The union data are tabulated from one quarter of the sample and are limited to wage and salary workers (self-employed workers are excluded).

... Hammond: Beating back barriers of race and gender

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"When I walk on the job site, before they see my gender, they see my skin color," Hammond said.

Hammond was following in the footsteps of Charlene "Charlie" Molden, who had blazed the trail as the first black woman to become an inside electrical wireman at Local 48.

"So I'd show up at the job site, and here's what I'd hear: 'God damn it, here comes Charlie.' And I'd say, 'Hey, I'm not Charlie.' And I'd hear, 'Oh shit, another one.'"

"You've got to remember: This is 1979. There haven't been women. There haven't been black women."

As her first year drew to a close, she was working on a construction project building a warehouse at Port of Portland Terminal 5 when the journeyman she was assigned to work with came to her and with a guilty look, said, "I can't do what they want me to do."

"What's that?" Hammond asked.

Almost 40 years later, she remembers his reply: "They told me you had a bad attitude, that

IN HER OWN WORDS IBEW Local 48 Business Representative Donna Hammond joins Portland State University professor Roberta Hunte for a presentation and discussion about race sponsored by the University of Oregon Labor Education and Research Center (LERC). Hammond will talk about how she overcame racial and gender barriers in the labor movement. Hunte will talk about her research on women in the trades and present her short film, "Sista in the Brotherhood" about the experience of a black woman Carpenter apprentice on a construction job site.

- Thursday, Feb. 8, 6 to 8:30 p.m., White Stag Building 70 N.W. Couch St., Portland.

your attendance was poor, you couldn't follow instructions, and had a very poor work ethic. But everything that I've asked you to do, you've been able to perform. If I lay you off, you'll be dismissed from the program. I can't do what they want me to do."

He didn't. He kept her on. It would be one of many times someone gave her a chance, even when someone else wouldn't.

Brush with death

On job sites working with electricity, there were times when a bit of racially-tinged paranoia could be a survival skill.

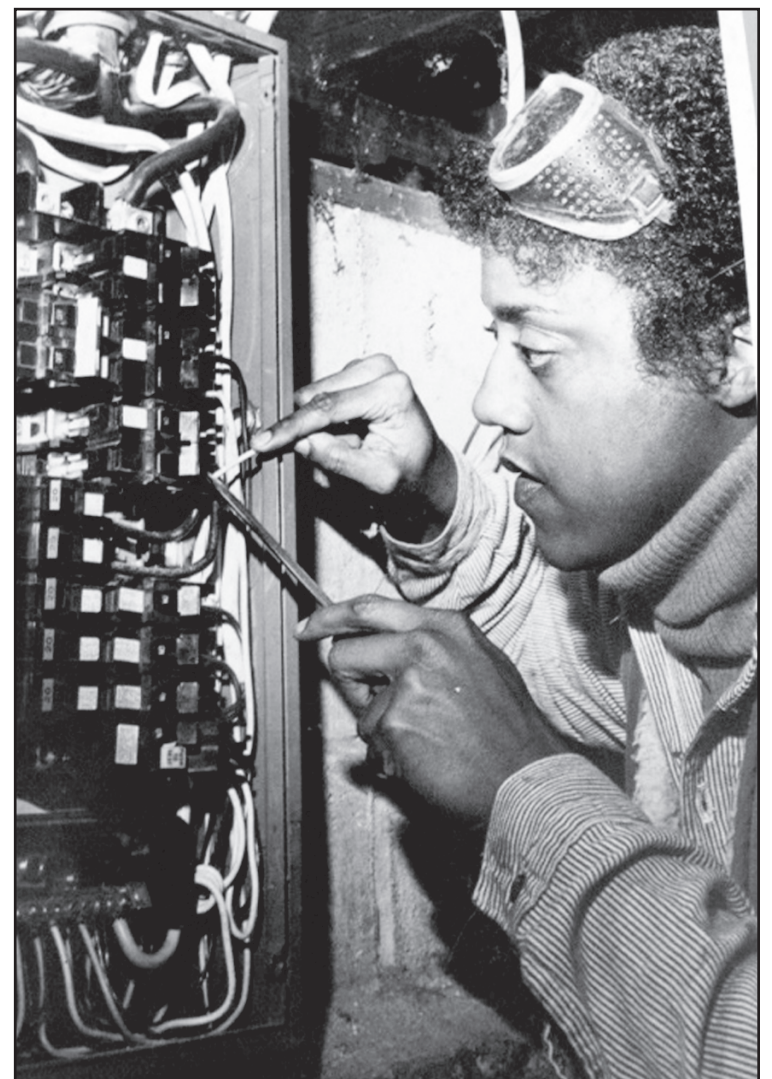
Hammond will never forget the time as a two-year apprentice she was working at a paper mill in Newberg, and a foreman assigned her and the black male journeyman she was working

with to remove an electric transformer from a water-filled mudhole, on the double, and told them it was de-energized.

The journeyman, Omar Shabazz, told her never to trust anyone's say-so, and said they'd better check to see if there was current. She did. It was live. Backing away from the electrified transformer, she looked up and saw a crowd of white hats looking down at her from a catwalk. (Foremen tended to wear white construction hats).

"Was this the Klan standing up there? They were watching to see what would happen as we were getting ready to get blown up. ... If had touched it, I would not be sitting here today. We would have been electrocuted immediately."

Hammond is convinced they



LIVE WIRE: Donna Hammond at work as an IBEW Local 48 electrical apprentice in the late 1970s.

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