

# Labor Militancy Is The Only Way To Increase Union Membership



*Agitated workers face the factory owner in [The Strike](#), painted by Robert Koehler in 1886*

09-01-2024 ~ *We need to rebuild the labor movement, and that means not going back to the kind of unions that existed in the postwar era. We need unions with a radical vision, unions that exert power in the workplace and society.*

With Labor Day 2024 upon us, it is important to critically reflect on the current state of the U.S. labor movement and the challenges that it faces in an environment where Big Business dominates the economy and mainstream society continues to abide allegiance to the values of a Lockean political culture in which ruthless individualism reigns supreme. To put it mildly, without a strong labor movement and a public spirit guiding our institutions, the country will never succeed in realizing the vision of a just and fair society.

However, the news on the labor front is not very encouraging. The share of U.S. workers who belong to a union has been declining since the early 1980s—an era which coincides with the full swing of the neoliberal counterrevolution and deindustrialization. In [1983](#), the first year for which comparable data are available, the union membership rate was 20.1 percent and declined to 11.1 percent in 2015.

In [2021](#), the union membership rate was 10.3 percent and dropped to 10.1 percent in 2022. In [2023](#), union membership declined even further to 10.0

percent, which is a [historic low](#).

The irony is that the United States has seen a “union boom” over the last couple of years. Thousands of employees at [Starbucks](#) stores across the country have voted to unionize and workers at [Amazon warehouses](#) and [Trader Joe’s](#), [grad students](#), and [Uber and Lyft](#) drivers also joined the unionization fight. But the data, as cited above, tells a different story. The share of U.S. workers belonging to a union continues to decline and is now at the lowest rate in history. Today, organized labor in the United States is dominated by [public-sector employees](#), which is more than five times higher than the 6 percent rate of private-sector employees.

The [United States](#) is near the bottom among industrialized democracies when it comes to union membership rates. The average level of union membership across the [European Union](#) (EU) is 23 percent, but the average is held down by relatively low levels of membership in some large EU states, such as Germany with 18 percent and France with 8 percent. However, even in countries where union density is lower, such as in France, virtually all workers are covered by a collective bargaining agreement. In Denmark, Sweden and Finland, union density is 70 percent. Incidentally, the Nordic countries consistently rank among the happiest nations in the world. In the latest [World Happiness Report](#), the United States doesn’t even make the top 20 list. Trade union density is even higher in [Africa](#) and most parts of Asia than it is in the United States.

Why is union membership in the United States so low? This is something of an anomaly considering the fact that [polls](#) consistently reveal that majorities of U.S. adults see the decline in union membership as bad for the country and for working people. It is mostly ultra-conservatives and reactionary think tanks like the [Hoover Institution](#) that believe that the decline of unions is good news.

Globalization, technology, and the transformation of an industrial economy into a service-oriented society are the most common reasons offered for the decline of U.S. unions. However, these explanations, even when put together, are not sufficient in explaining why the U.S. has one of the lowest union membership rates in the world. [Europe](#) is much more open than the United States, according to the International Monetary Fund. Thus, globalization alone cannot be an explanation for the general decline in unionization in the U.S. Europe’s technology lags behind the U.S., but it is not technology but rather institutional

arrangements and intentional policy decisions that succeed in altering in significant ways the balance between capital and labor that can explain why union membership has plateaued at 10 percent among workers in the United States. We must acknowledge that neoliberalism itself is not a monolithic process; rather, it is affected by a variety of domestic pressures and thus plays out differently in different national contexts.

In the U.S., it is politics—manifested in the form of a vicious class struggle orchestrated from the economic elite and its supporters—that keeps workers from joining or creating a union. The basic rights of U.S. workers to unionize and engage in collective bargaining have been under attack throughout the history of U.S. capitalism. [Strikes](#) figured prominently during the height of the industrialization era and well into the twentieth century, with immigrant workers from Ireland, Italy and Germany being at the forefront of labor radicalism, but so did employer and government violence directed against striking workers. The U.S. has the [most violent labor history](#) in the western world. The U.S. government may be the only government in the industrialized world that has engaged in systematic [massacres of striking workers](#).

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), also known as the Wagner Act, was passed in July 1935. The [Act](#), whose broad intention was to guarantee employees “the right to self-organization, to form, join, or assist labor organizations, to bargain collectively through representatives of their own choosing, and to engage in concerted activities for the purpose of collective bargaining or other mutual aid and protection” was probably instrumental in the dramatic increase in unionization rates that was witnessed from the late 1930s to the 1950s, hitting its apex at 32 percent; yet, its failures are well established and can, conversely, be attributed to the decline in private sector unionization rates that started taking place following their [peak](#) in the late 1950s. In fact, NLRA, however ironic this may sound, may be responsible for the creation of “[a vibrant non-union sector instead](#).”

The Supreme Court, of course, has also been instrumental in creating a “vibrant non-union sector.” The Court has consistently made decisions that limit union power, including the right to strike. Rather typical here was the stance taken by the [union-busting Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O’Connor](#) when she said that employees who strike in support of union bargaining “[gamble](#)” their jobs.

Indeed, in no other country in the western world has the [right to strike](#) been as severely undermined as in the U.S. In fact, U.S. labor law is an outright failure when it comes to safeguarding one of the key International Labor Organization (ILO) principles, which is to guarantee the right to strike, as it allows employers to enjoy [the right to replace workers](#) who strike for better wages and conditions.

Indeed, in no other country in the western world is anti-union consulting as huge of an industry as it is in the United States. As shocking as it may sound, it's estimated that employers spend more than \$400 million per year in hiring "[union-avoidance](#)" consultants.

Moreover, "the party of the people" is equally guilty for throwing U.S. workers under the bus. All three living Democratic presidents ([Jimmy Carter](#), Barack Obama, and Bill Clinton) [let down unions](#) and certainly were no friends to working people. In fact, they worked ceaselessly to promote neoliberalism and overall policies that were a disaster for labor, with [Clinton](#) leading the pack.

But no narrative for the dismal state of unionization in the U.S. can be fully complete if the role that unions themselves played in undermining the vision and the goals of the labor movement can be left out. As David N. Gibbs points out in his outstanding book [The Revolt of the Rich](#), the largest union in the country, the AFL-CIO, "was conceived on very conservative terms as an institutional reaction against leftist strains within the labor movement" and one of its main activities was working with the Central Intelligence Agency in fighting communism both at home and abroad. Getting rid of class struggle unionism was a primary objective of the AFL-CIO even when the union had begun its steady decline. Worse still, the [ties between mafia and labor unions](#), which go back to the early 1930s, had reached such a high point by the late 1950 that government investigation on labor racketeering got underway that in the ensuing decades would lead to convictions of major labor leader and mob figures. As James B. Jacobs argues in [Mobsters, Unions, and the Feds: The Mafia and the American Labor Movement](#), "labor racketeering" was a major feature of U.S. organized labor and contributed in a very big way to the decline of U.S. trade unionism.

The U.S. labor movement has been experiencing a renaissance of sorts over the last few years, although the truth of the matter is that union membership remains stagnant. The challenges ahead are indeed immense as there is no alternative left party in the U.S. and no social democratic traditions which rely on trade unions

for softening the injustices inflicted by the capitalist system. U.S. capitalism is brutal and the reactionary forces, which lead all the way up to the Supreme Court, are extremely powerful, well organized, and massively funded.

Yet, we need unions as they are absolutely a critical force in the struggle to create a fair and just society. We need to rebuild the labor movement, and that means not going back to the kind of unions that existed in the postwar era. We need unions with a radical vision, unions that exert power in the workplace and society. There is no reason why a service-based economy, which is mainly associated with low wages and insecure employment, should offer less opportunities for union membership. In this context, there is much to learn from the experience of the [Union of Southern Service Workers](#), a union that doesn't shy away from taking militant action on the job against low pay and dangerous work conditions and to demand a seat at the table.

Rejecting business unionism and renewing in turn [labor militancy](#) is the only way to increase union membership and fight back labor exploitation and inequality.

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