

United Steelworkers Lead Mobilization Drive As American Unions Face Growing Vulnerability



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05-07-2025 ~ The USW must navigate factionalism while championing labor rights amid rising anti-union pressures and global trade fragmentation.

In March 2025, hundreds of workers at the JSW Steel facility in Ohio became the latest to unionize under the United Steelworkers Union (USW). Though not the country's largest union, its full name—the United Steel, Paper and Forestry, Rubber, Manufacturing, Energy, Allied and Industrial and Service Workers International Union—reflects its expansive reach across multiple industries.

Recent organizing campaigns show the union's growing reach across key sectors. In 2022, 700 manufacturing workers at a Bobcat plant in North Dakota voted to join the USW, while around 12,000 academic employees at the University of Pittsburgh have joined the USW as of 2024. In 2023, 1,500 school bus builders at Blue Bird Corporation in Georgia and 600 miners in Minnesota's Iron Range also unionized, joining the 1.2 million active and retired USW members, alongside the union's international allies.

In the last few years, the USW and other unions have grown more active through grassroots mobilization, with education and retail emerging as major sectors witnessing unionization. British Columbia Starbucks workers joined the USW in March 2025, Philadelphia Whole Foods workers aligned with the United Food and

Commercial Workers (UFCW) International Union in January, and the first Chipotle store, located in Michigan, unionized with the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in 2022, indicating a major change for previously resistant workplaces.

According to a 2025 Economic Policy Institute article, public support for unions is at 70 percent, a 60-year high, and millions of Americans want to join one. Yet membership remains historically low, with just six percent of private sector workers unionized. The USW's scale and international reach position it to lead a unionization comeback, but coordinated resistance from companies and the government continues to pose serious obstacles.

Formation and Evolution

Formed [in 1942](#) during World War II by merging smaller unions, the USW's centralized structure helped it negotiate wages, contracts, price controls, and legal arbitration, leveraging steel's critical role in the war effort. This "[service model](#)," based on cooperative labor-management relations, helped it drive the postwar unionization boom, expanding into industries like aluminum, paper, rubber, and chemicals in the 1950s and 1960s. The USW also became a strong supporter of civil rights and the [Democratic Party's labor coalition](#).

However, the service model faltered in the 1980s as deindustrialization, [Reagan-era policies](#), and global competition erased U.S. manufacturing jobs and union membership. In response, the USW switched toward a mobilization model [by the 1990s](#), encouraging more organizing, protests, and rank-and-file participation, while merging with smaller unions and industries in health care, public services, and education.

Under former USW President Leo Gerard (2001-2019), the union expanded further, merging with the Paper, Allied-Industrial, Chemical and Energy Workers (PACE) International Union [in 2005](#), becoming the largest industrial union in North America. Today, the union operates as a hybrid, retaining centralized leadership for bargaining and administration while encouraging grassroots mobilization. Recent USW initiatives, like the 2022 launch of its [oil bargaining program](#) and the successful [2023 Blue Bird union drive](#) in Georgia, show its increasing emphasis on direct action.

Domestic Influence

The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) coordinates much of the U.S. labor movement, though not all unions come under it. Representing around [15 million](#) workers, major affiliates include the National Education Association (NEA), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, and the UFCW. While each holds significant influence, the USW has distinct advantages.

Alongside its presence in key U.S. industries, the USW draws strength from a mixed urban-rural base, allowing it a multi-pronged approach to labor rights. Rural union members often see unionization of local industries as a defense against outsourcing and out-of-state or foreign ownership. Urban union workers tend to prioritize workplace equality and public investment. Still, [across both settings](#), union members share core demands of fair pay, job security, and safe working conditions.

The USW's influence has played out geopolitically. Its Democratic roots have been visible in its support for former presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden in their elections, and for Kamala Harris in the 2024 election. However, as the party has [leaned toward more pro-business policies](#), the USW has applied pressure to secure meaningful support. The Biden administration's 2024 move to [block](#) Japan's Nippon Steel from acquiring U.S. Steel was seen as a major win for the union. The Trump administration is also [against the acquisition](#).

The USW is not inherently opposed to foreign ownership: in March 2025, [Toyota's plans](#) to acquire Radius Recycling, which employs 280 USW steelworkers, was given the green light by USW after SEC filings included a formal letter promising to honor union contracts and maintain operations. In most cases, however, including the Nippon Steel deal, these assurances are lacking and therefore receive little union support.

Unions are under growing pressure from [anti-labor campaigns](#), a trend reinvigorated by the Trump administration. In March 2025, Trump signed an executive order [ending collective bargaining](#) for several federal agencies. But the pressure predates this; National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) data shows "worker-filed petitions to decertify unions have risen by more than 50 percent [since 2020](#)," according to World Oil. Also, the right-to-work laws, [which undermine unions](#), began to expand [in the 2010s](#).

The NLRB itself has become a battleground, especially after the [2023 Cemex ruling](#), which made it easier for unions to gain recognition without a formal election. Some figures within the Trump administration are pushing to [reverse that decision](#), which may compound widespread labor rights violations and weaken enforcement of existing rules.

The USW's internal diversity also requires careful balancing. Academic members often hold different priorities than those in oil and mining, and [at a 2024 conference](#), following the USW's endorsement of Harris, tensions arose with oil workers who were more supportive of Trump.

Still, the USW has committed to representing all members, even in regions like the South [where labor laws are weaker](#), as shown by its role in the Blue Bird union drive in Georgia in 2023. The USW is also increasingly engaged in the green transition, [replacing job losses](#) in the oil sector by retraining workers for high-wage clean energy roles.

International Alliances

Another way the USW has built influence is by looking beyond the U.S. borders. Unlike many American unions, it maintains deeply integrated ties with transnational partners. While unions like the SEIU also coordinate international campaigns, the USW's partnerships are more structurally unified.

[In 2005](#), the USW and its Canadian branch formally merged into a single North American union, one of the first such arrangements between major unions in the Western world. It later extended cooperation to some [Caribbean labor groups](#) as well, for even greater coordination that plays out today. While [supportive of tariffs](#) on Chinese steel imports, the USW released a joint [resolution in April 2025](#) calling for an end to other tariffs that threaten job security and weaken their cross-border bargaining power.

Also in 2005, the USW [allied itself](#) with the Alliance of Canadian Cinema, Television and Radio Artists, Australian Workers' Union, Construction, Forestry, Mining and Energy Union of Australia, National Union of Mining, Steel and Allied Workers of the Republic of Mexico, and Brazil's CNM-CUT.

In 2008, the USW [formed a transatlantic alliance](#) with Unite the Union in the UK and Ireland, establishing Workers Uniting, the first global union of its kind. Created in response to globalization, it allowed coordinated strategies on trade,

layoffs, and industrial policies, focusing on shared efforts to protect manufacturing from outsourcing and speculative capital. [In 2016](#), the USW announced its support for the nationalization of the UK's steel industry, calling on allies to endorse the measure in a public letter to Unite the Union's general secretary.

Another instance of international cooperation [came in 2012](#), when the USW partnered with Spain's Mondragon, a worker-owned cooperative, to promote a "union co-op model" aimed at building sustainable jobs and communities. The USW also [helped found](#) IndustriALL that year, a global union federation now representing 50 million workers. Through it, USW participates in international campaigns targeting corporations like Glencore and Amazon and supports labor rights and unionization efforts in poor nations. USW is also a core member of the [BlueGreen Alliance](#), supporting environmental sustainability with labor rights.

Trump's tariffs across industries will nonetheless complicate the USW's ability to coordinate with its international allies, as the temptation to seize the best national deal amid global economic uncertainty may weaken efforts to secure collective benefits through unified action.

Obstacles for the Future

There is also a risk of the USW and other American unions falling into complacency. In the 1930s, the USW was a [major organizing](#) force, but by 2023, only 3 percent of its budget went to organizing, compared to 13 percent spent by Teamsters in 2021. Instead, funds are diverted from organizing strikes and into investments, a model of [finance unionism](#) that has drawn criticism for prioritizing passive income for members over expansion and action. Through this model, unions risk becoming insurance providers [that serve a shrinking base](#) rather than fighting for the broader working class.

The NLRB petitions [filed in April 2025](#) by drivers at Energy Transfer facilities in Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana to decertify their ties to the USW also show some worker discontent with the union, further pushed along by the National Right to Work Legal Defense Foundation.

Alongside the Trump administration, the ultrawealthy and major corporations are working fervently to undermine unions and keep membership at historic lows. But the growing public support for unions presents an opportunity for the USW to

capitalize on momentum. By coordinating with domestic and international allies and embracing direct action, the USW can build its reputation and gain additional experience in fighting for and securing workers' rights.

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