UNION MEMBERS SLIGHTLY UP IN 2007

The number of workers belonging to a union rose by 311,000 to 15.7 million in 2007, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. Union members accounted for 12.1 percent of employed wage and salary workers, essentially unchanged from 12.0 percent in 2006. In 1983, the first year for which comparable union data are available, the union membership rate was 20.1 percent. Highlights from the 2007 data include:

- Workers in the public sector had a union membership rate nearly five times that of private sector employees.
- Education, training, and library occupations had the highest unionization rate among all occupations, at 37.2 percent, followed closely by protective service occupations at 35.2 percent.
- Among demographic groups, the union membership rate was highest for black men and lowest for Hispanic women.
- Wage and salary workers ages 45 to 54 (15.7 percent) and ages 55 to 64 (16.1 percent) were more likely to be union members than were workers ages 16 to 24 (4.8 percent).

Union membership rate for public sector workers (35.9 percent) was substantially higher than for private industry workers (7.5 percent). Within the public sector, local government workers had the highest membership rate, 41.8 percent. This group includes workers in several heavily unionized occupations, such as teachers, police officers, and fire fighters. Private sector industries with high unionization rates include transportation and utilities (22.1 percent), telecommunications (19.7 percent), and construction (13.9 percent). Unionization rates were relatively low in agriculture and related industries (1.5 percent) and in financial activities (2.0 percent).

Among occupational groups, education, training, and library occupations (37.2 percent) and protective service occupations (35.2 percent) had the highest unionization rates in 2007; farming, fishing, and forestry occupations (2.7 percent) and sales and related occupations (3.3 percent) had the lowest rates.

Men had a higher unionization rate (13.0 percent) than women (11.1 percent), the gap considerably narrowing since 1983, when the rate for men was about 10 percentage points higher than the rate for women. Black workers were more likely to be union members (14.3 percent) than were whites (11.8 percent), Asians (10.9 percent), or Hispanics (9.8 percent). Within these major groups, black men had the highest union membership rate (15.8 percent) while Hispanic women had the lowest rate (9.6 percent).

Among age groups, union membership rates were highest among workers 55 to 64 years old (16.1 percent) and 45 to 54 years old (15.7 percent). The lowest union membership rates occurred among those ages 16 to 24 (4.8 percent). Full-time workers were about twice as likely as part-time workers to be union members, 13.2 compared with 6.5 percent.

About 1.6 million wage and salary workers were represented by a union on their main job in 2007, while not being union members themselves. Slightly more than half of these workers were employed in government.

In 2007, among full-time wage and salary workers, union members had median weekly earnings of $863 while those who were not represented by unions had median weekly earnings of $663.

Four states had union membership rates over 20.0 percent—New York (25.2 percent), Alaska (23.8 percent), Hawaii (23.4 percent), and Washington (20.2 percent). The largest numbers of union members lived in California (2.5 million) and New York (2.1 million). Among the five states reporting union membership rates below 5.0 percent in 2007, North Carolina posted the lowest rate (3.0 percent), followed by Virginia (3.7 percent), South Carolina (4.1 percent), Georgia (4.4 percent), and Texas (4.7 percent).


(Source: U.S. Dept. of Labor, News, No. 08-0092, January 25, 2008.)