

STUDY: Labor Unions are Growing in States that Protect Bargaining Rights

Workers' Rights Amendment Has Sparked Surge of New Union Members in Illinois; Michigan Added Members following Repeal of Anti-Union Law

LA GRANGE, IL, UNITED STATES, September 8, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- The 11th annual State of the Unions study from Illinois Economic Policy Institute (ILEPI) and Project for Middle Class Renewal (PMCR) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign shows that while union density continues to shrink nationally, union membership is growing in states that have protected, restored, or strengthened collective bargaining rights. This dynamic has been especially evident in the Midwestern states of Illinois—which has seen a surge of new union members after codifying a right to collective bargaining in its State Constitution in 2022—and in Michigan, which has experienced similar growth following the repeal of its so-called “Right to Work” law at the beginning of 2024. The research also analyzes a range of socio-economic metrics, detailing how union workers earn higher wages, are more likely to be homeowners, and are less likely to rely on government assistance programs.

ILEPI

ILLINOIS ECONOMIC POLICY INSTITUTE

Labor Market Outcome	26 "Right to Work" (RTW) States	24 Collective Bargaining States + DC	"RTW" Difference
			-7,271,687
			-9.1%
	-178,976		-188,198
			-\$2.50 (or -6.9%)
	-1.0%	-0.3%	-0.7%

Region	Union Members 2023	Unionization Rate 2023	Union Members 2024	Unionization Rate 2024	Change
					-169,754

Illinois Workers (2015-2024)	Union Member	Nonunion Workers	Union Difference
Public Health Insurance Coverage	4.9%	8.4%	-3.5%
Received EITC Benefits	5.5%	7.8%	-2.3%
Homeownership Rate	77.3%	69.1%	8.3%

Read the report, The State of the Unions 2025: [A Profile of Unionization in Chicago, in Illinois, and](#)

[in the United States.](#)

The report concludes that one of the biggest policy distinctions affecting union membership nationally is the presence of so-called “right to work laws,” which have been adopted in 26 states and been imposed on public sector workers in all 50 states by the US Supreme Court’s 2018 Janus vs. AFSCME decision. These laws allow workers who are represented by unions to stop paying for the services they receive, thereby starving unions of the resources they could otherwise use to organize new workers or negotiate over things like wages and working conditions. “The State of the Unions 2025” report shows that “right to work” states have fewer union members, dramatically lower unionization rates, and their workers earn around 7% lower wages on average— even after accounting for local differences in the cost of living.

“Though the adoption of so-called ‘right to work’ policy frameworks have generally eroded worker bargaining power—especially in the historically more heavily unionized public sector---polling shows persistently high approval of labor unions with as many as half of non-union workers saying they would organize their workplaces if they could,” said co-author and ILEPI Economist Frank Manzo. “The data shows that this is precisely what is happening in states that protect workers rights.”

Nationally, the 26 “right-to-work” states shed nearly 200,000 union members last year, while states that protect workers rights gained nearly 10,000 members. As one such example, Illinois added 27,000 union members in 2024 and saw its overall unionization rate under non-pandemic economic conditions increase for the first time since 2017. Since amending its state constitution to guarantee the right to collective bargaining and ban “right-to-work” laws in 2022, Illinois has seen more new workers join unions (18,300 members organized between 2022 and 2024) than the preceding seven years combined (16,500 between 2015 and 2021).

Similarly, the State of Michigan repealed its “right-to-work” law in early 2024 and subsequently gained 15,000 union members last year. In the 11 years Michigan’s “right to work” law had been in effect, the state lost nearly 70,000 union members and saw its union density fall by more than 21%. Last year alone, its union density increased by more than 5% relative to the prior year (from 12.8% to 13.4%).

Researchers also analyzed Current Population Survey data from the U.S. Census Bureau and Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) (2015-2024) to identify additional economic trends within Illinois’ union and non-union workforce segments. They further concluded that Illinois’ union members earned 12% higher wages on average, were 8% more likely to be homeowners, 5% more likely to have health insurance coverage, and were substantially less likely to rely on Medicaid, food stamps (SNAP), and Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) government assistance.

“The data reveal a clear link between public policy choices, bargaining power, and economic outcomes for working families,” added University of Illinois professor, PMCR Director, and study coauthor Dr. Robert Bruno. “Unfortunately, notwithstanding the clear gains being made in states

like Illinois and Michigan many state and federal policy makers continue to advance policies that create barriers to the organizing and economic aspirations of workers.”

The State of Utah recently stripped collective bargaining rights from public service workers, including police officers, teachers, and firefighters. Additionally, the authors highlighted a number of actions the Trump Administration has taken this year that are likely to shrink union membership, including revoking the collective bargaining rights of more than 1 million federal workers—including 45,000 in Illinois) cancelling union contracts for hundreds of thousands employees at the Departments of Defense, Treasury, Veterans Affairs, Agriculture, and other federal agencies; imposing federal hiring freezes; closing a number of federal agencies; and terminating the Chair of the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), effectively shutting down the agency that rules on union organizing activities. The authors further cautioned that accurate assessments in 2026 and beyond will depend on reliable data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics at the U.S. Department of Labor, whose Commissioner was recently fired.

“Despite recent gains and overwhelming support across the political spectrum in public opinion polling, the labor movement suddenly faces significant new challenges,” Manzo and Bruno concluded. “To better align with voter preferences, we encourage policy makers to reflect on the data in this report, and to reconsider their support for ‘right to work’ laws and other policies that have weakened unions. The data conclusively shows these measures have only proven to depress wages for working families already struggling with rising costs, and to create additional welfare dependence paid for by taxpayers.”

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[The Illinois Economic Policy Institute \(ILEPI\)](#) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization founded in 2013 to deliver actionable research and expert analysis on public policy issues impacting businesses, working families, and taxpayers.

[The Project for Middle Class Renewal \(PMCR\)](#) at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign investigates working conditions in today's economy to elevate public discourse aimed at reducing poverty, creating more stable forms of employment, and promoting middle-class jobs.

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