

UNIONS ARE GOOD

FOR WOMEN

2023 was a high-profile year for unions,

with the “hot labor summer” resulting in record-breaking raises and greater awareness.¹ Public approval for unions in the United States is at peak levels (67%)² and nearly half of nonunionized workers have indicated they would join a union if they could.³

These statistics likely reflect an understanding that union membership offers important benefits and protections, even as workers continue to face many barriers to successfully forming a union and reaching a collective bargaining agreement.

Overall, women currently make up almost half of union members (45.6%),⁴ and union membership is especially important for women. While union membership for women overall decreased from 9.6% to 9.5% between 2022 and 2023, union membership among Black women rose slightly from 10.3% to 10.5% and for Latinas from 8.5% to 8.8%. At the same time, union membership for white women decreased from 9.5% to 9.3% and for Asian women decreased from 9.1% to 7.8%.⁵ Union membership for women has declined since data was first made available in 1983,⁶ but current trends indicate a potential future increase in women’s union membership.

Women who are union members experience more economic security for themselves and their families than nonunion members, including higher and more equal wages. For women of color, who face even more significant pay gaps and discrimination at work, union membership provides particularly meaningful wage improvements.⁷ Union members also have greater access to benefits—such as paid leave and sick days, predictable schedules, affordable health insurance, and retirement benefits—and the right not to be fired without cause.

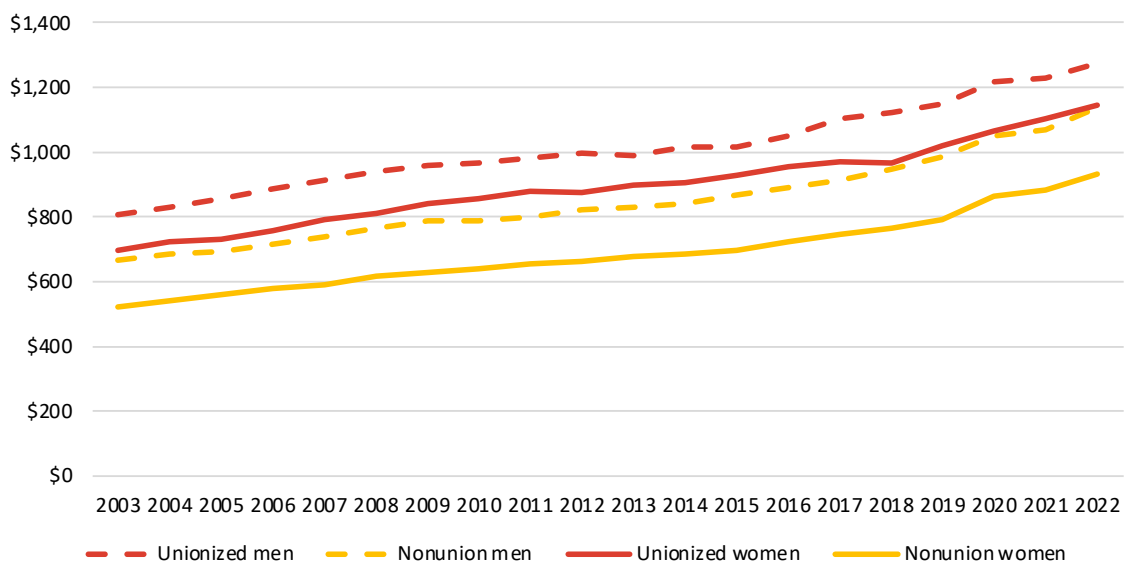
The data in this factsheet is based on union density, or the rate at which working people have joined unions as dues-paying union members. It does not reflect the number of workers who are represented by a union who are not union members. To be a union member, employees must pay dues.⁸

Women in Unions Are Paid Higher Wages and Experience Smaller Wage Gaps Than Nonunionized Women.

Women represent nearly two-thirds of the workforce in the lowest paying jobs, and women of every race—especially Latinas, Native women, and Black women—are overrepresented in these jobs across the United States.⁹ The union advantage when it comes to wages is therefore especially important to women. Though belonging to a union raises wages for all workers, women who are union members typically experience larger gains in their wages than men.¹⁰ The wage benefit is especially large for Latinas.¹¹ In 2023:

- ▶ **Unionized women** who worked full time were typically paid \$1,174 per week—19% (or \$191) more than women who are not in a union. In contrast, unionized men who worked full time were typically paid \$1,341 per week—14% (or \$161) more than men workers who are not in a union.¹²
- ▶ Among women, **Latina workers** experience particularly large financial benefits from union membership. Among full-time workers, unionized Latinas were typically paid 34% (or \$265) more per week than Latina nonunion workers.¹³
- ▶ Among full-time workers, **unionized Black women** were typically paid 20% (or \$176) more per week than Black women nonunion workers.¹⁴
- ▶ Among full-time workers, **unionized Asian women** were typically paid 7% (or \$89) more per week than Asian women nonunion workers.¹⁵
- ▶ Among full-time workers, **unionized white women** were typically paid 21% (or \$207) more per week than white women nonunion workers.¹⁶

Median Weekly Earnings by Union Membership (2003–2023)



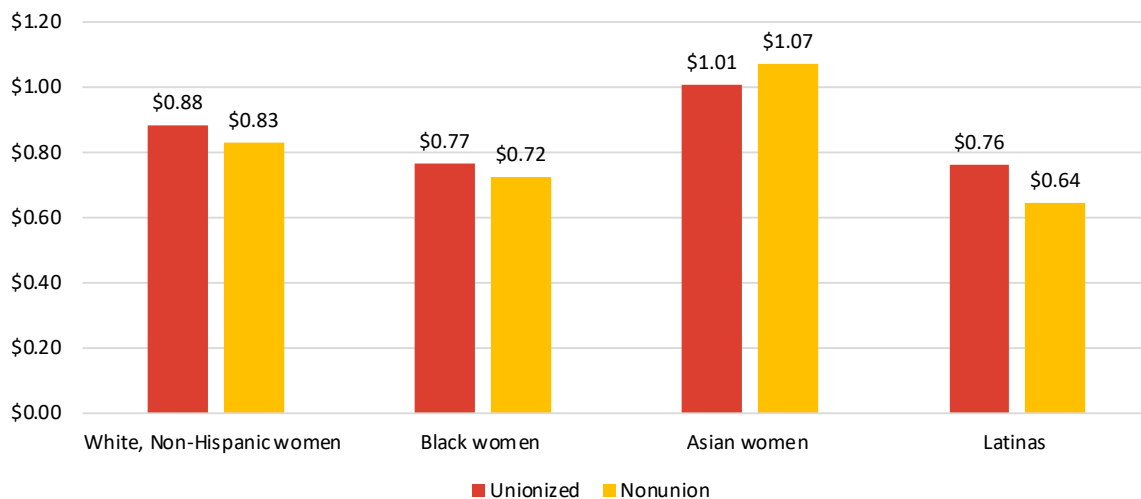
Source: BLS, “Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by union affiliation and selected characteristics, 2022–2023 annual averages,” Table 2 in Union Members – 2023 (Washington, DC: Jan 23, 2024), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t02.htm>. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/webapps/legacy/cpslutab2.htm>.

Women typically lose approximately \$10,000 per year to the gender wage gap, with even higher losses for many women of color.¹⁷ However, unions work to level the playing field, as unionized women aren't just paid higher wages, they are paid wages more equal to their male counterparts. In 2023:

- ▶ **Unionized women** overall were typically paid 88 cents for every dollar unionized men were paid, while nonunion women were typically paid just 83 cents for every dollar nonunion men were paid.¹⁸
- ▶ **Unionized Black women** were typically paid 77 cents for every dollar unionized white men were paid, while Black women not in unions were typically paid just 72 cents for every dollar nonunion white men were paid.¹⁹
- ▶ **Unionized Latinas** were typically paid 76 cents for every dollar unionized white men were paid, while nonunion Latinas were typically paid just 64 cents for every dollar nonunion white men were paid.²⁰
- ▶ While **unionized Asian women** were typically paid \$1.01 for every dollar unionized white men were paid, and Asian women not in unions were typically paid 1.07 cents for every dollar nonunion white men were paid, Asian women in unions make 7% more than nonunionized Asian women.²¹
- ▶ **Unionized white women** were typically paid 88 cents for every dollar unionized white men were paid, while nonunion white women were typically paid just 83 cents for every dollar nonunion white men were paid.²²

Unions also help to ensure transparency around wages and often bargain for set pay scales that result in smaller gender wage gaps.²³ Union pay transparency helps to interrupt a culture of secrecy around pay that often makes it extremely difficult for individual workers to prevent or discover disparities.

What Women Are Paid for Every Dollar White, non-Hispanic Men Are Paid by Race/Ethnicity and Union Status (2023)



Source: NWLC calculations using U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, "Table 2. Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by union affiliation and selected characteristics, 2022–2023 annual averages," (Washington, DC: Jan. 23, 2024), <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t02.htm>.

The wage gap among union and nonunion members will vary from other wage gap data calculated by NWLC as other wage gap data uses 2022 American Community Survey data and are not broken down by union status.

Union Workers Have Greater Access to Workplace Benefits.

Workers who are union members often benefit from workplace benefits such as paid leave and sick days, predictable schedules, retirement supports, and health care coverage and reproductive rights. Because unions are able to negotiate for these benefits, they are likely to be provided more often and be more affordable and accessible.

Paid Leave and Paid Sick Time: Union members are more likely than nonunion workers to have access to paid family and medical leave and paid sick time. Ninety-two percent of unionized workers have access to paid sick time, compared with 78% of nonunion workers,²⁴ enabling them to seek medical care and recover from illnesses. Unions can also negotiate paid family and medical leave in union contracts, a key benefit enabling workers to recover from childbirth and care for new babies as well as recover from their own illness or care for sick family members.²⁵ Paid sick time and paid leave are particularly important for women, who disproportionately bear responsibility for child²⁶ and elder care²⁷—but since only 13 states and Washington, D.C. require employers to provide paid leave,²⁸ and only 15 states and D.C. require employers to provide paid sick time, far too many workers lack these benefits.²⁹

Retirement Benefits: Retirement benefits are critically important to women workers, as women typically face lower lifetime earnings than men due to unequal pay³⁰ but live six years longer than men, on average.³¹ Interruptions in work history caused by caregiving responsibilities also reduce women's cumulative earnings. Because the primary sources of retirement income—Social Security, employer-sponsored pensions, and tax-favored retirement savings accounts—are based on employment and earnings, women workers face greater barriers to attaining retirement security.³² Accordingly, the ability of unions to provide retirement benefits is of particular importance to women union members. Retirement benefits are available to roughly 95% of union members, and close to 85% participate.³³

Predictable Schedules: Predictable work hours help women workers to successfully meet their obligations at work and in the rest of their lives. In contrast, unstable schedules with frequent last-minute changes undermine workers' ability to fulfill caregiving responsibilities, secure child care, find transportation, seek health care, complete education and training, and budget to meet financial needs.³⁴ Women are particularly impacted by unstable scheduling because women take on the bulk of caregiving responsibilities in families and also are disproportionately represented in service sector jobs in which employers are more likely to use "just-in-time" scheduling practices.³⁵ Unions can help ensure that their members are protected from these practices by bargaining over predictable schedules and hours of work. While 46% of nonunion workers report having little or no input into their hours of work, only 22% of union workers are similarly unable to influence their hours.³⁶ Additionally, among workers who do not have consistent schedules, union workers typically have greater advance notice of their work schedules: roughly 34% of workers who belong to a union are provided their work schedules at least a week ahead of time, compared to only 23% of nonunion workers.³⁷

Health Benefits: Unions can negotiate health benefits with employers, making benefits more accessible. In 2023, 95% of union workers had access to employer-sponsored health insurance, compared with only 71% of nonunion workers.³⁸ Union-bargained plans are typically more affordable for workers, especially for family health coverage, with employers paying roughly 78% of premium for union employees as compared to 65% for nonunion employees.³⁹ In fact, a 2013 study showed annual employee contributions for family coverage averaged \$828 for employer-sponsored insurance in union-bargained plans, compared to \$4,565 for nonunion bargained plans.⁴⁰

Reproductive Rights: Unions also play an important role in protecting and expanding reproductive rights for workers.⁴¹ Many unions recognize that reproductive rights are workers' rights and are fighting to establish workplace protections for workers accessing reproductive health care, including abortion.⁴² Unions can and have put into place protections for individuals seeking abortions and other reproductive health care, including insurance coverage and travel benefits.⁴³ Model contract language for collective bargaining agreements is available that includes these and other protections, such as anti-discrimination protections, privacy protections, reimbursement for out-of-pocket costs, and more.⁴⁴

Union Workers Have Additional Protections From Dismissal, Which Help Workers Assert and Enforce Their Rights.

Despite legal protections against retaliation, workers who speak out about workplace concerns and try to advocate for their rights often experience unlawful retaliatory action, including termination.⁴⁵ Workplace retaliation for challenging discrimination makes up the largest share of charges filed with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.⁴⁶ While retaliation is harmful to all workers, it can be economically devastating to low-paid workers who depend on each paycheck to meet their basic needs. Women—especially women of color, Native women, women with disabilities, and immigrant women—and LGBTQIA+ individuals are disproportionately likely to work in low-paid jobs or otherwise experience financial hardship, which makes the possibility of retaliation for enforcing workplace rights especially threatening.⁴⁷

Collective bargaining agreements provide union members with stronger avenues for preventing, addressing, and reporting employer wrongdoing, as well as greater protections from retaliation than are available to most nonunion workers. Many union workers have “just cause” protections, which help empower workers to enforce their workplace rights.⁴⁸ With “just cause” protections, workers are better protected from arbitrary and retaliatory firing because employers must provide valid reasons for their discharge.

Legal Reforms Are Needed to Support Unionization.

Despite positive public perception,⁴⁹ increased actions by workers seeking union membership, and the quantifiable workplace benefits for unionized workers, only 6.0% of workers in the private sector and 33.1% of workers in the public sector are union members.⁵⁰ Polling shows that workers want to join unions, but union membership has been declining for decades as a result of anti-union tactics by employers and shortfalls in public policy that leave the right to organize insufficiently protected.⁵¹ The federal law designed to protect private sector workers' rights to organize a union, the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), has been worn down and weakened over time from relentless corporate attacks and hostile courts.⁵² Employers regularly break the law, mounting sophisticated, coercive, anti-union campaigns and stalling contract negotiations.⁵³

Despite the high-profile union campaigns at many well-known companies where workers have successfully voted to form unions, many of these workers do not yet have contracts with their employers and therefore do not enjoy the benefits of union membership.⁵⁴ Some companies have gone so far as to bring a lawsuit seeking to declare the NLRB unconstitutional as they face charges for hundreds of violations of workers' organizing rights.⁵⁵ Employers rarely face significant penalties for interference in worker organizing and contract negotiations.⁵⁶

Moreover, many groups of workers, such as domestic workers and farmworkers, are excluded from NLRA protections. In the public sector, where many unionized women work, there is no uniform federal law protecting the ability of public service workers to organize into unions.⁵⁷ The right to unionize for public workers varies state by state, and all over the country, state-based collective bargaining rights have been weakened through anti-union laws and Supreme Court decisions that allow unionized workers to bow out of paying their fair share for the benefits they receive through their contract, weakening the strength of their unions in the process.⁵⁸

Much more is needed to support, strengthen, and protect workers' right to organize. All workers, regardless of their occupations, should have the right to form a union and bargain for contracts. Federal legislation like the [Richard L. Trumka Protecting the Right to Organize Act \(PRO Act\)](#)⁵⁹ and the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act⁶⁰ are examples of bills that would help ensure that workers can come together collectively to build strong unions and better workplaces for all.



Acknowledgements

This factsheet is authored by Adrienne DerVartanian and Sarah Javaid and is an updated version based on a previous factsheet authored by Amanda Fins, Sarah David Heydemann, and Jasmine Tucker. The authors would like to thank Gaylynn Burroughs, Kathryn Domina, Christina Iruela Lane, Lark Lewis, Emily Martin, Laura Narefsky, Marybeth Onyeukwu, Maria Patrick, Beth Stover, Jordan Reynolds, Selina Tran, Julie Vogtman, Clarke Wheeler, and Hilary Woodward, for their design, review, and dissemination of this factsheet.

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- 59 Richard L. Trumka Protecting the Right to Organize Act of 2023, S. 567 and H.R. 20.
- 60 Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act of 2021, H.R. 5727.