

Unions Are Good for Women

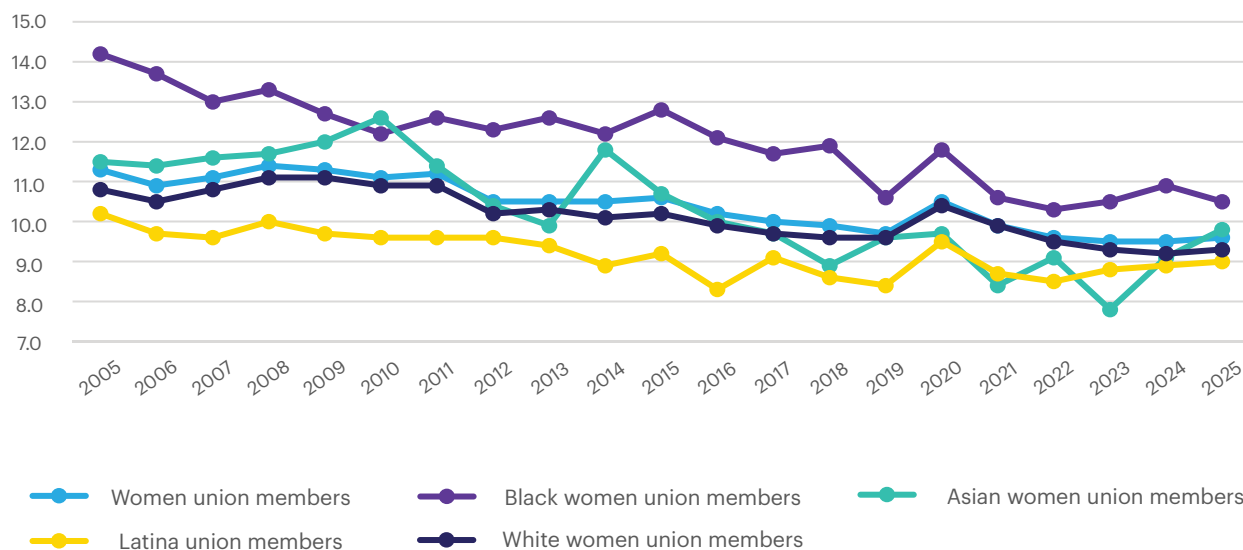
BY LAYLA ZONOUZY

Support for unions remains near record highs,¹ reaching levels last seen in the 1950s and 1960s amidst peak union membership,² and with good reason: the collective power of union membership helps members achieve higher wages, better benefits and working conditions, and the power to enforce their rights. These benefits are particularly important for women in the workforce, as women who are union members experience more economic security for themselves and their families than nonunion members, including higher and more equal wages. For many women of color, who face significant pay gaps compared to their white male peers,³ union membership provides meaningful wage improvements.⁴ Union members also have greater access to employer-sponsored benefits—such as paid leave and sick days, health insurance, and retirement benefits—and protections against getting fired without cause.

The data in this factsheet is based on union density, or the rate at which working people ages 16 and over 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, workers must pay dues.⁵

Overall, women make up almost half of union members (46.0%),⁶ and in August 2026, about 3 in 4 women (74%) and people of color (76%) approve of unions,⁷ signaling just how desirable union membership is. Yet, because of anti-union tactics by employers, shortfalls in public policy that leave the right to organize insufficiently protected, and recent federal attacks on unions, union membership rates generally have declined over the past 20 years, including for women. Membership rates for women, overall, have gone from 11.3% in 2005 to 9.6% in 2025. During the same time period, union membership rates among all groups of women by race and ethnicity have followed a similar trend: union membership among Black women declined from 14.2% to 10.5%, with both Black women and men experiencing the sharpest drops in membership over the last 20 years, Asian women from 11.5% to 9.8%, Latinas from 10.2% to 9.0%, and white women from 10.8% to 9.3%.⁸ While union membership rates have fallen, polling shows that interest in joining a union has only increased during the same period.⁹

Union Membership Rates for Women by Race (2005–2025)



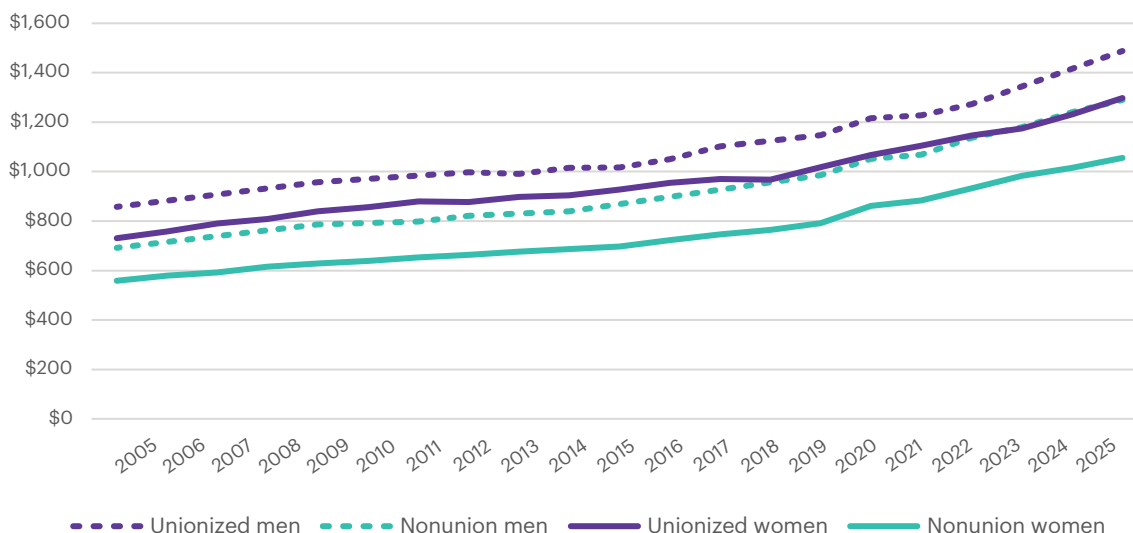
Source: U.S. Department of Labor, 2025 Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 2025 BLS, "Table 1. Union affiliation of employed wage and salary workers by selected characteristics," February 18, 2026, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t01.htm>. Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpslatabs.htm>.

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

Among the notable benefits of unions to women, the union advantage to wages is especially significant. Though belonging to a union raises wages for all workers, women who are union members typically experience larger gains in their wages than men, with some of the most marked wage benefits being for Latinas. In 2025:

- Unionized women who worked full time were typically paid \$1,297 per week—23% (or \$241) more than women who were not in a union (\$1,056). In contrast, unionized men who worked full time were typically paid \$1,487 per week—15% (or \$198) more than men who were not in a union (\$1,289).¹⁰
- Latina workers experienced notably large financial benefits from union membership. Among full-time workers, unionized Latinas were typically paid 34% (or \$296) more per week than nonunion Latina workers.
- Among full-time workers, unionized Black women were typically paid 19% (or \$176) more per week than nonunion Black women workers.
- Among full-time workers, unionized white women were typically paid 25% (or \$272) more per week than white women nonunion workers.¹¹

Median Weekly Earnings by Union Membership (2005–2025)



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, 2025 Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), "Table 2. Median weekly earnings of full-time wage and salary workers by union affiliation and selected characteristics. 2024–2025 annual averages," February 18, 2026, <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.t02.htm>. [JT14.1] Historical data available at <https://www.bls.gov/cps/cpslutabs.htm>.

Regardless of union status, among full-time, year-round workers, women typically lose over \$13,500 per year to the gender wage gap, with even higher losses for many women of color as compared to white, non-Hispanic men.¹² However, unions can have a significant impact on narrowing the wage gap: not only are unionized women paid higher wages, they also are paid wages more equal to their male counterparts. In 2025:

- Unionized women overall were typically paid 87 cents for every dollar unionized men were paid, while nonunion women were typically paid just 82 cents for every dollar nonunion men were paid.¹³

The wage gap among union and nonunion members will differ from other wage gap data calculated by NWLC as other wage gap data uses the most recent annual data available from the U.S. Census Bureau from 2024 and are not broken down by union status.

Union workers have greater access to workplace benefits

Union members also have greater access to benefits—such as paid sick time, health insurance, and retirement benefits. Because unions are able to collectively bargain for these benefits, they are likely to be provided more often and be more accessible.

- **PAID FAMILY AND MEDICAL LEAVE AND PAID SICK TIME:** Union members typically have more access to paid time off than nonunion workers. Ninety-five percent of unionized workers had access to personal, sick, or paid family leave, compared with 83% of nonunion workers in 2025,¹⁴ enabling them to seek medical care, recover from illnesses, and take care of family members who are ill. Paid sick time and paid family and medical leave are particularly important for women, who disproportionately bear responsibility for child¹⁵ and elder care¹⁶—but since only 14 states and Washington, D.C., require employers to provide paid family and medical leave (including Virginia which will mandate this program effective 2028/2029),¹⁷ and only 18 states and D.C. require employers to provide paid sick time, far too many workers lack these benefits.¹⁸

- RETIREMENT BENEFITS:** Retirement benefits are critically important to women workers, as women typically face lower lifetime earnings than men due to unequal pay¹⁹ but live about five years longer than men, on average.²⁰ Thus, older women face higher rates of poverty and economic insecurity: in 2023, nearly 3 in 5 seniors living in poverty were women.²¹ Because 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,²² and in 2021 experienced a retirement income gap that was 4% larger than the median wage gap.²³ Hence, the ability of unions to provide retirement benefits has a crucial impact on women union members. Retirement benefits are available to roughly 94% of union members compared to only 72% of nonunion members.²⁴ The difference is even more stark when considering access to pensions plans, which have been shown to have a very significant role in reducing retiree poverty and distributing pension income more equally.²⁵ Union workers see over five times the availability of defined benefit plans compared to nonunion workers (79% and 15%, respectively).²⁶
- HEALTH BENEFITS:** Unions can negotiate health benefits with employers, making benefits more accessible. In 2025, 95% of union workers had access to employer-sponsored medical care benefits, compared with only 71% of nonunion workers.²⁷ Moreover, unions aren't just critical for health care accessibility but also affordability. Since the expiration of enhanced Affordable Care Act (ACA) tax credits at the end of 2025, many enrollees in ACA plans have seen incredibly steep increases in premiums in 2026,²⁸ further exacerbating the ongoing trend of average monthly insurance premiums for workers rising annually and far outpacing inflation.²⁹ Despite these rising health care costs being increasingly allocated to workers,³⁰ union workers generally have lower premiums for family plans, lower deductibles, and lower out-of-pocket expenses.³¹ In fact, in 2025, the average monthly employee premium for family coverage for all civilian workers was roughly 13.3% lower for union workers compared to their nonunion counterparts (\$590.92 and \$681.79, respectively). For workers in the private sector in 2025, the difference is even more pronounced: union workers pay an estimated 22.4% less in average monthly employee premiums for family coverage compared to nonunion workers (\$540.67 and \$696.85, respectively).³²
- WORKPLACE PROTECTIONS FROM DISCIPLINE AND DISMISSAL:** 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. In the age of AI, especially given the limited policymaking to ensure oversight and protections, collective bargaining also has the power to establish necessary guardrails to protect workers from harmful uses and impacts of AI systems.³³ These guardrails are notably relevant for women, who encompass 83% of the most AI-vulnerable jobs, defined as jobs with high levels of AI-exposure and those that, if a worker were to be replaced by AI, would lend themselves to a difficult transition to new work.³⁴ Furthermore, women are systemically underrepresented in AI development,³⁵ leading to gendered biases in data input and algorithms powering AI systems, reinforcing existing occupational segregation.³⁶ Additionally, many union workers have "just cause" protections, which help empower workers to enforce their workplace rights.³⁷ With "just cause" protections, workers are better protected from arbitrary and retaliatory firing because employers must provide valid reasons for their discharge.³⁸

Despite these many benefits, the strong public support for unions, and ongoing increased interest in union organizing, workers face extraordinary challenges successfully forming a union and negotiating a collective bargaining agreement. In addition to ongoing employer anti-union tactics³⁹ and the weakening of the National Labor Relations Act over time,⁴⁰ workers now face the Trump administration's attacks on unions, including his unprecedented firing of NLRB member Gwynne Wilcox,⁴¹ his revocation of collective bargaining rights for over a million federal workers represented by unions,⁴² impacting more than 84% of the federal unionized workforce,⁴³ and his indiscriminate firing of thousands of federal workers,⁴⁴ among other harmful attacks on worker rights.⁴⁵ With these increased attacks on unions and workers' rights, unions are increasingly important to protect workers' rights.⁴⁶ Now, more than ever, it's time to be in solidarity with unions.

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FOOTNOTES

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