

Increase Unionization

By Hayley Brown

Union membership in the United States has declined dramatically in recent decades, from 20.1 percent in 1983 to just 10 percent in 2025. The decline has persisted despite high public support for unions and recognition of their importance. This disconnect reflects decades of policy decisions that have weakened workers' ability to organize alongside ballooning corporate power and inequality.

The decline of unions has had profound consequences for workers and the broader economy. Historically, unions have raised wages and expanded benefits, delivering increased job security and job satisfaction for union workers. Unions also raise standards across entire industries, which benefits both union and nonunion workers. Falling unionization rates erode worker power, and workers' collective influence in the political sphere has decreased, undermining the resilience of democratic systems. Over this time, inequality has increased.

To reverse the trend, policymakers must remove structural barriers that prevent workers from forming and sustaining unions and strengthen labor law enforcement. Unions must also be willing to take a more holistic view of their role in building and wielding worker power. Growing the labor movement should be a national priority to support both economic justice and democratic accountability.

Solution: Pass Policies to Increase Union Organizing

Policymakers should make it easier for workers in the United States to organize unions, and through them wield power both in and out of the workplace. They must:

- Ensure that workers can exercise the rights they already have by providing effective, timely enforcement and robust protections against retaliation.
- Strengthen collective bargaining rights for workers in both the public and private sectors by enacting comprehensive reforms, such as the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act and the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act.
- Adopt additional complementary measures, such as card-check recognition.
- Repeal or fundamentally revise the Taft-Hartley Act, which restricts union activity and collective bargaining rights.
- Look to countries where labor institutions remain strong for lessons on protecting workers' ability to act collectively.
- Ensure that the National Labor Relations Board has the resources it needs to enforce both existing and strengthened labor protections rigorously.

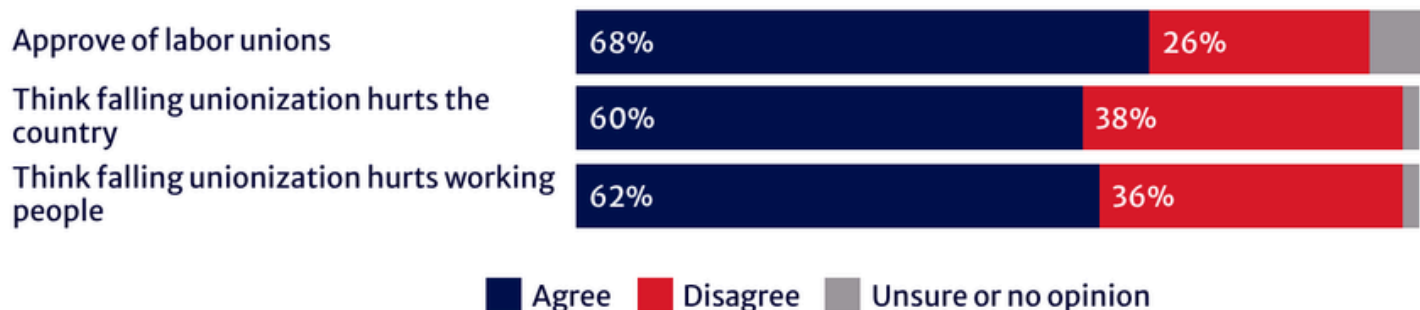
Beyond legislation, unions must embrace an ambitious, expansive approach to organizing. They must move beyond the narrow "business unionism" model and treat unionization as a holistic vehicle for advancing workers' economic, social, and political interests.

The Public Supports Unions

Union favorability in the US remains high, with 68 percent expressing support in recent polls. Another recent national poll found that most US adults view the decline in the share of unionized workers as harmful to both the country (60 percent) and working people (62 percent).

Strong Public Support for Unions, Concern About Their Decline

Share of US adults who...



Source: Union favorability shares from Gallup Poll Social Series: Work and Education, August 1–20, 2025. Opinions on union decline from 2025 Pew Research Center's American Trends Panel, August 4–10, 2025. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.



Increasing inequality and threats to democratic norms in the US make it especially urgent to translate broad public support for unions into representational gains. Unions are one of the most effective means by which working people can build the power they need to counter the worst excesses of concentrated capital. Reversing decades of corporate sabotage to strengthen the labor movement will require sustained commitment, but that commitment will serve a goal that is both popular and materially consequential.

Resources:

- Six Ways a 78-Year-Old Law is Still Screwing Workers, Hayley Brown, **CEPR**, June 23, 2025.
- The Union Advantage for Black Workers: Wages, Benefits, and the Unfinished March, Hayley Brown and Jordan Billings, **CEPR**, August 21, 2025.
- Unions and Inequality over the Twentieth Century: New Evidence from Survey Data, **Griswold Center for Economic Policy Studies**, October 2020.
- Labor Unions, **Gallup**, 2025.
- Politics Matter: Changes in Unionisation Rates in Rich Countries, 1960–2010. John Schmitt and Alexandra Mitukiewicz, **Industrial Relations Journal**, May 2012.
- Majorities of Adults See Decline of Union Membership as Bad for the US and Working People. Ted Van Green, **Pew Research Center**, August 27, 2025.