

State of the Unions

California Labor in 2024



UCLA

College | Social Sciences

**Institute for Research
on Labor & Employment**

UC BERKELEY

LABOR CENTER

August 2025

Table of contents

Introduction

Part I

- I. A Profile of Union Workers in the Golden State
- II. Private Sector Union Organizing
- III. Union Membership by Organization
- IV. Prominent Strikes and Direct Actions

Part II

- V. A Seat at the Table: Sectoral Standards and Worker Organizing in Fast Food
- VI. Inland Empire Warehouse Workers' Organizing and Policy Victories in 2024
- VII. Farmworker Organizing in California: Growing the UFW Legacy

Authors

UC Berkeley Labor Center

Savannah Hunter, Enrique Lopezlira, and Patrick Wade

UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE)

Justin McBride, Chris Zepeda-Millán, and Cristhian Lin

UC Riverside Inland Empire Labor and Community Center (IELCC)

Jesús “Chuy” Flores, David Mickey-Pabello, and Ellen Reese

Acknowledgements

Communications and coordination support: Julie Light, Jenifer MacGillvary, and Willa Needham

Research support: Annette Galliot and Irv Hershenbaum

Reviewers: Savannah Hunter, Ken Jacobs, Enrique Lopezlira, Justin McBride, Danielle Mahones, and Chloe Osmer



Introduction

These are uncertain times for workers and unions in California and the nation. On the one hand, support for unions is historically high, especially among young people. Recent strikes across industries as diverse as K-12 and higher education, auto manufacturing, film and television, and healthcare, to name a few, have galvanized non-union workers and increased awareness of the benefits of belonging to a union. On the other hand, union density at a national level continues to decline while the second Trump administration threatens to hobble federal regulatory agencies, including the National Labor Relations Board, and fire tens of thousands of federal workers. The impact of the administration's trade and tariff policies on the labor market remains uncertain. Additionally, the administration's mass deportation agenda is likely to have an impact on the state's labor force this year and beyond.

This edition of “State of the Unions” offers a profile of the unions in California on the cusp of potentially momentous political and economic changes. Compiling public data from 2024 about union membership, union elections, and strike activity, the report serves as a benchmark to measure the impact of changes in labor policy, worker power, and the health of organized labor.

Labor leaders, journalists, policymakers, and union members will find a complex story of union activity in the following report. Part I draws on statewide public data on union membership, union elections, and strike and protest activity by unions, identifying geographic, sectoral, and organizational patterns of change. Part II digs deeper into union activity in three important economic sectors: fast food, warehousing, and agriculture.

Key Findings

- **Union density in California has held steady for over two decades in defiance of national trends of long-term decline.** In 2024, one in six California workers (16.3% or 2.67 million) was represented by a labor union.
- **California's union members represent the state's diversity.** The typical union member in California is in their mid-40s, a person of color born in the United States, and has obtained educational experiences beyond high school. Union members are equally likely to be male or female. However, some groups are underrepresented in labor's ranks, and others are likely undercounted in public data.
- **Given the opportunity to vote in a union election, a large majority of California workers choose union representation.** In 2024, unions filed petitions for over 300 elections covering nearly 25,000 workers. Workers voted for union representation in over 83% of those elections, a slightly higher success rate than the nation as a whole.
- **State labor policy remains critical for worker protections across many sectors of the economy.** From sectoral bargaining to heat and workplace technology regulations, California workers and unions have a major interest in state-level policy.

California unions are building on a strong base to face old and new challenges. And while no one report can capture the full complexity of California's labor landscape, the State of the Unions 2024 offers many insights into how unions may face challenges, including housing and healthcare affordability, an aging workforce, workplace automation, and more.

This year's report also reflects growing coordination between labor research programs across the University of California system. Anchored by staff at the UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE) and the UC Berkeley Labor Center, we're pleased to highlight a contribution from the Inland Empire Labor and Community Center (IELCC) at UC Riverside. The IELCC is one of six new UC labor centers supporting labor organizations and workers across the diverse regions of California.

Toby Higbie, Director, UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE)

Brenda Muñoz, Executive Director, UC Berkeley Labor Center

CHAPTER 1

A Profile of Union Workers in the Golden State

UC Berkeley Labor Center

Savannah Hunter, Enrique Lopezlira, and Patrick Wade

This chapter presents a profile of unionized workers in California using data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), a household survey jointly conducted by the U.S. Census Bureau and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Our primary analysis uses data from 2023 and 2024, and includes employed wage and salary workers (not the self-employed) aged 16 and older who reported having earnings from work (see [methods appendix](#) for details). Workers self-report if they were a member of a union or covered by a union contract (see insert for how we define membership and coverage). We examine trends in unionization in the state, the industries and sectors where union-represented workers are employed, and key demographic characteristics of union members, offering a nuanced picture of the state's unionized workforce.

Key Terms	
Labor union	A group of workers who act collectively to negotiate wages, benefits, schedules, and other aspects of employment with their employer.
Covered workers/ union coverage	All workers who are covered by a union contract and represented by a labor union, whether or not they are members of the union. We also refer to this group as union-represented workers. When analyzing union density we typically reference union coverage.
Union members/ union membership	Workers who are represented by a union and who elect to become members of the union, typically by paying union dues. Union members are a subset of covered workers. When analyzing demographics we reference union members.
Employment	Employed civilian wage and salary workers 16 years or older who report having earnings from work.
Union density	Either the share of employed workers who are represented by a union contract (union coverage density) or the share of employed workers who are members of a union (union membership density). We typically reference union coverage density.

In 2024, about one in six workers (16.3%) in California, 2.67 million in all, were represented by a labor union. Of those, around 2.37 million workers were members of labor unions, meaning they elected to pay dues and participate in collectively running the union.¹ We find that union representation in California has held steady for over two decades, with between 16 and 18% of the workforce covered by a union contract. This stability does not reflect a stagnant movement; to the contrary, as the economy changes, new and consistent organizing is required to maintain union density at current levels. We also show that access to a union is unevenly dispersed across California's economy, with a deep divide between the public and private sectors as well as by industry.

California's union members represent the diversity of the state's workforce. At least half of the state's union members are women, and the majority are people of color. Union members are also older and more educated than the workforce as a whole. And more than half of union members are public servants. But some groups are underrepresented in organized labor, including Asian American and Pacific Islanders, foreign-born workers, younger workers, and workers without a college degree.

Union density by region, industry, and sector

Despite a long-term national decline in union density, California has maintained a relatively stable union presence—both in terms of the share of workers represented and the absolute number—though that stability masks important variations by geography, industry, and sector.

Union density holds steady in California

Union density for both coverage and membership has steadily declined in the United States over the past two decades. But in California, the share of the population represented by a union has held remarkably steady between 16 and 18% (see Figure 1.1). California unions represented 2.67 million workers in 2024—more workers than any other state. But measured as density, the share of the total workforce represented by a union, California ranks 8th behind Hawaii (27.6%), New York (21.9%), Alaska (19.4%), Washington (18.3%), Connecticut (17.8%), Oregon (17.5%), and New Jersey (17.3%).²

Union density is calculated as a ratio of the number of represented workers (or members) and the number of people employed; thus it can fluctuate with changes in employment and business cycles.³ For example, union density (as coverage) was 17.6% in California in 2020, with around 2.65 million workers represented by a union (see Figure 1.2). In 2024, union density was lower at 16.3%; however, the total number of workers represented by a union was slightly higher at 2.67 million. California's relatively stable union density over the past two decades is in contrast to initial steep declines in the 1980s and early 1990s, and the slow and steady decline in union density in the United States overall. With industry-level changes in employment, population growth, and changes in turnover rates, even maintaining union density at a stable rate requires a lot of new organizing.⁴

Figure 1.1 - Union Density, California and U.S., 1983-2024

Lines show the share of workers who are represented by a union (coverage) or who are members of unions in California and the U.S. For example, in 2024, 16.3% of California workers were represented by a union and 14.5% of California workers were members of unions.

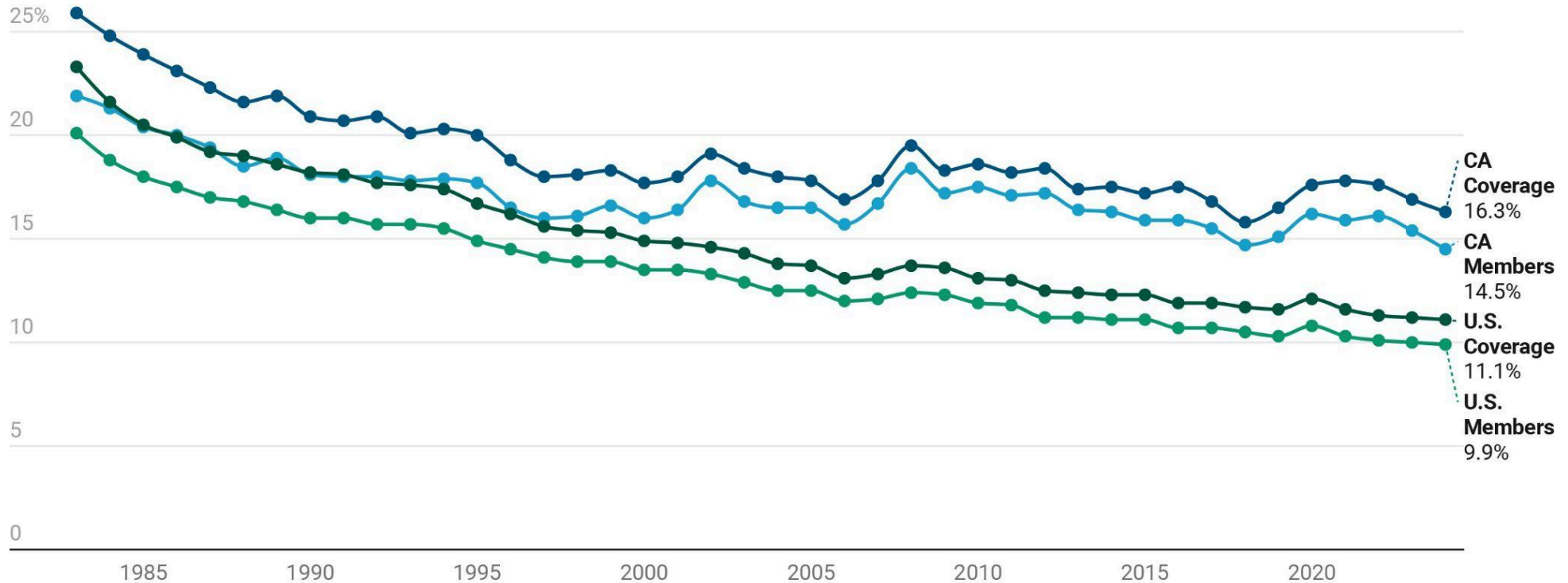


Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: EPI CPS-ORG 2023-2024

Figure 1.2 - Employment, Union Coverage, and Union Membership Levels, California, 2005-2025 (in millions)

Lines show the number of California workers employed, represented by a union (coverage), or members of unions. For example, in 2024, 2.67 million California workers were covered by a union contract.

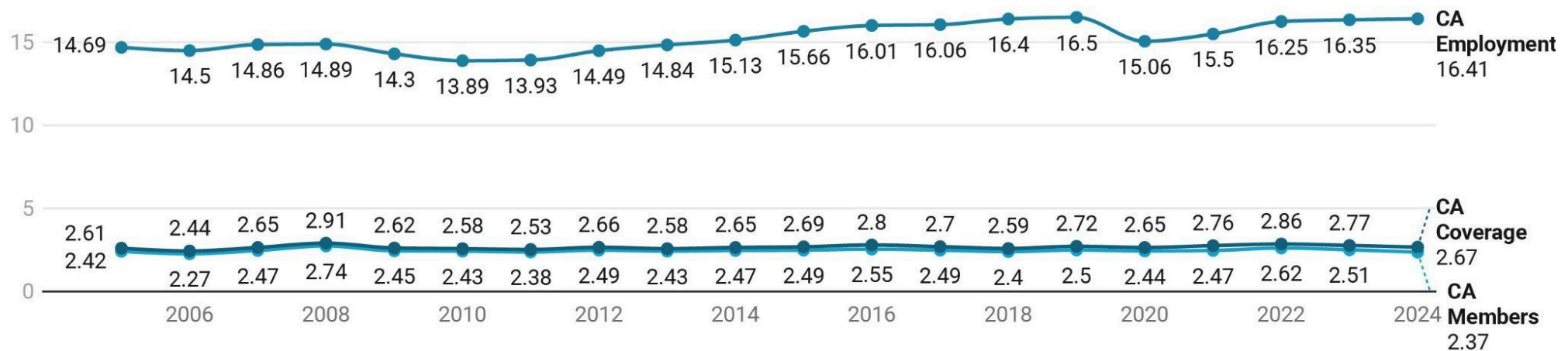


Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: EPI CPS-ORG 2023-2024

Between 2023 and 2024, CPS data show a decrease in the total number of union-represented workers and union members in California.⁵ However, like density, the longer-run trend shows that while the counts may fluctuate in any given year, overall the number of workers who are either represented by or members of unions has held fairly steady over the past two decades, at over two and a half million (see Figure 1.2). Importantly, these data are likely an undercount due to limitations inherent in survey-based data. For example, respondents in household surveys may not accurately recall or report that they are represented by a union.⁶ Additionally, the CPS does not ask self-employed workers if they are union members or covered by a union contract, which undercounts the 661,800 unionized In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) providers and 46,900 unionized family child care providers who are classified as self-employed (see the demographics section for more discussion).

Unions represent workers across the state

Union-represented workers are distributed throughout the state generally proportionately to the size of the regional working population (see Figure 1.3). The Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim metropolitan area is one of the most populous in the state, employing a third (33.9%) of the state workforce. The Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim metro also claims the most union-represented workers; almost three out of 10 (29.2%) union-represented workers live in the region. More than one in seven (15.1%) union-represented workers live in the Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario metro area, and around one in eight (12.1%) live in the San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont metro area.

Union coverage density varies across the state (see Figure 1.3). In some regions, union density is higher than the state 2023–2024 average rate of 16.6%. For example, more than one in five workers living in the Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura (24.0%), Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario (21.8%), and Sacramento-Arden-Arcade-Roseville (21.7%) metro areas are represented by a union. However, in other areas, union density is lower than the state average. For example, around one in 10 (10.8%) workers in the San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara metro area is covered by a union contract.

Figure 1.3 - Employment, Union Representation, and Union Density, California Metro Areas, 2023-2024

Table shows the total number of union-represented workers in each metro area, the share of all California workers and the share of all California union-represented workers (as coverage) that live in each metro area, and includes union density (as coverage) within each metro area. For example, 33.9% of all California workers live in the Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim metro area and 29.2% of all California workers represented by a union or 793,651 workers live there. Overall, 14.3% of workers living in the LA metro area are represented by a union.

Metro Areas	Total Union Represented	Share of the Workforce	Share Union Represented	Union Density
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim	793,651	33.9%	29.2%	14.3%
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario	412,049	11.5%	15.1%	21.8%
San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont	329,473	12.4%	12.1%	16.3%
San Diego-Carlsbad-San Marcos	227,057	8.9%	8.3%	15.7%
Sacramento-Arden-Arcade-Roseville	203,276	5.7%	7.5%	21.7%
Stockton-Lodi-Modesto*	134,091	3.8%	4.9%	21.3%
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara	113,766	6.5%	4.2%	10.8%
Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura	81,281	2.1%	3.0%	24.0%
Santa Rosa-Petaluma-Vallejo-Fairfield*	65,233	2.2%	2.4%	18.4%
Fresno	63,176	2.2%	2.3%	17.8%
Bakersfield	58,847	1.9%	2.2%	18.7%
Santa Cruz-Watsonville-Salinas*	45,252	1.6%	1.7%	17.5%
Redding-Chico*	37,361	1.4%	1.4%	16.4%
Santa Maria-Santa Barbara	39,248	1.3%	1.4%	18.3%
Rest of California*	116,967	4.7%	4.3%	15.2%

*These data represent union coverage. Geographies represent metropolitan areas (Core Based Statistical Areas). *Denotes geographic areas combined due to small sample sizes.*

Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: EPI CPS-ORG 2023-2024

Union density varies by industry and sector

Union density in California varies considerably by industry and sector (see Figure 1.4). Public-sector union density is strong, with more than one out of every two (54.5%) workers represented by a union. In contrast, only nine out of every 100 (9.1%) workers in the private (for-profit) sector have a union. In the not-for-profit sector, around one out of six (16.3%) workers has union representation.

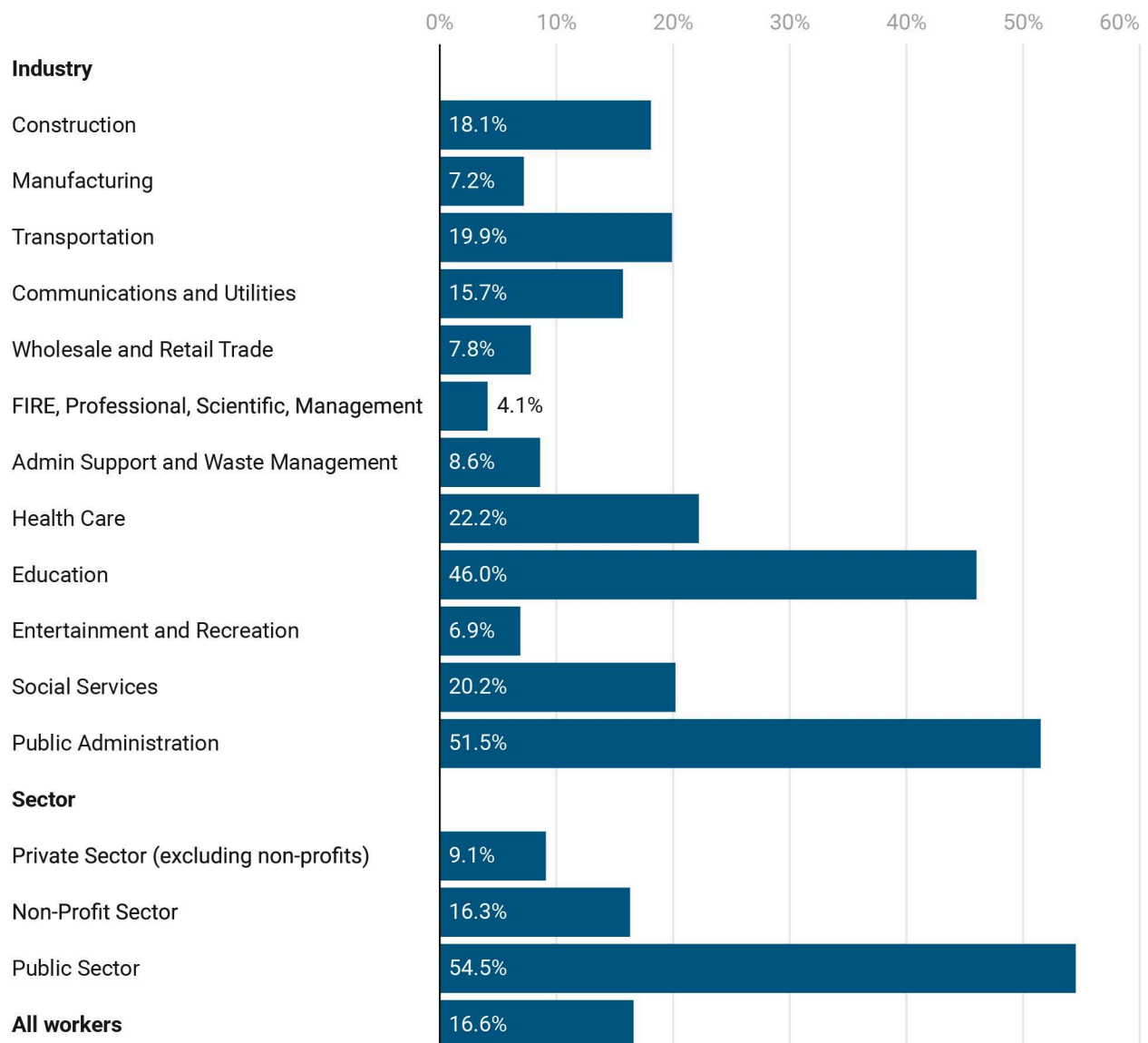
Industries more prevalent or exclusively in the public sector tend to have stronger collective bargaining rights and higher union density. Public Administration (51.5%), Education (46.0%), and Social Services (20.2%) all have higher-than-average rates of unionization.⁷ Even so, several predominantly private-sector industries also have higher-than-average rates of union density, including Health Care (22.2%), Transportation (19.9%), and Construction (18.1%). Union density is substantially lower than the state average in Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate (FIRE) and Professional, Scientific, and Management (4.1%); Entertainment and Recreation (6.9%); Wholesale and Retail Trade (7.8%); Manufacturing (7.2%),⁸ and Administrative Support and Waste Management (8.6%).

Union-represented workers are very unevenly distributed among industries; that is, some industries have a much higher concentration of union representation than others (see Figure 1.5). For example, in Education, access to a union is much more common than in other industries. Around nine out of 100 (9.3%) California workers are employed in Education, but around one out of every four (25.9%) union-represented workers is employed in that industry. In California, only 5.8% of all workers—but 17.9% of union-represented workers—are employed in Public Administration. And one in nine (11.0%) workers is employed in Health Care, but around one in seven (14.7%) union-represented workers is employed in that industry. In total, almost 60% of all union-represented workers are employed in either Education, Public Administration, or Health Care, but only about a quarter of the state's workforce is employed in those industries.

Corresponding to the discussion above of industries with lower-than-average density, Figure 1.5 also shows industries where workers particularly lack union representation. For example, one out of every seven (14.9%) California workers is employed in the FIRE and Professional, Scientific, and Management industries, but less than four out of 100 (3.7%) union-represented workers statewide are employed in those industries. Wholesale and Retail Trade, Manufacturing,⁹ and Entertainment and Recreation show large gaps between the share of workers employed in that industry and the share of workers in those industries who have a union, as well.

Figure 1.4 - Union Density by Industry and Sector, California, 2023-2024

Figure shows union density (as coverage) by industry and sector. For example, 46.0% of workers employed in Education are represented by a union.

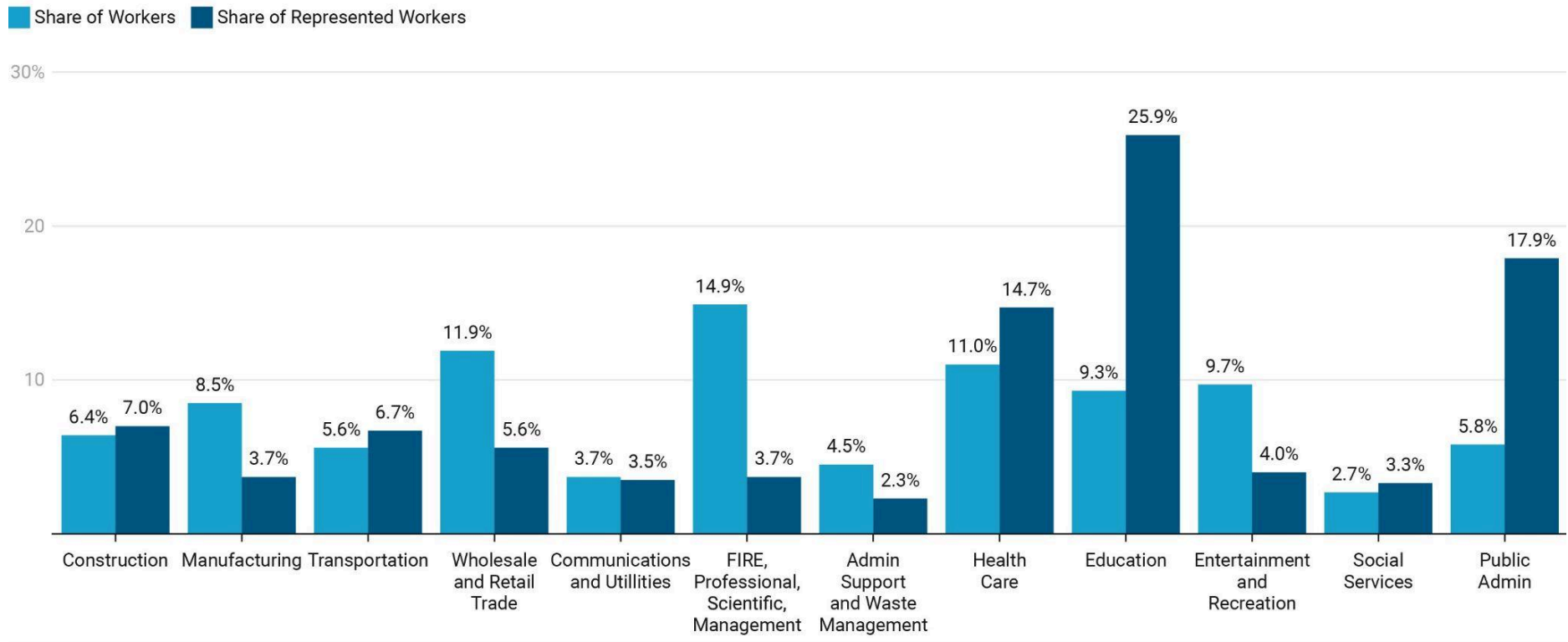


These data represent union coverage. Manufacturing includes many occupations not involved in production. Union density is 10.6% in manufacturing if restricted to workers in production, operation, and technician occupations (which make up 48.3% of the overall manufacturing workforce). FIRE means Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate.

Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: EPI CPS-ORG 2023-202

Figure 1.5 - Employment and Unionization by Industry, California, 2023-2024

Figure shows the share of the workforce employed in each industry and the share of union-represented workers (coverage) employed in each industry. For example, 11.0% of all California workers are employed in Health Care and around 14.7% of union-represented workers are employed in that industry.



Manufacturing includes many occupations. About half (48.3%) of the manufacturing workforce is employed in production, operation, or technician occupations. FIRE means Finance, Insurance, and Real Estate.

Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: EPI CPS-ORG 2023-2024

Who are the state's union members?

California's union membership reflects some of the state's workforce diversity. The majority of union members are people of color and at least half are women. But there are gaps in union representation for some groups, particularly private sector workers, younger workers, Asian American and Pacific Islanders, foreign-born workers, and workers without a college degree. And systemic undercounting in household survey data can also obscure the full demographic reality—especially for low-wage, immigrant, and home care and childcare workers.

The figures in this section describe demographic characteristics of California's union members ([see the appendix](#) for demographics of union members in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay Area metropolitan areas specifically). The figures compare the demographic makeup of the California workforce to the demographic makeup of union members, providing an opportunity to see how representative union members are of all working Californians.

More than half of union members are public servants

A little more than half (52.9%) of union members are public servants (see Figure 1.6). While more than three out of four (78.7%) working Californians are employed in the for-profit private sector, only four out of 10 (41.4%) union members work for private sector employers. This gap in union membership among private sector employees corresponds to low union density in the private sector, as shown earlier. Interestingly, the share of all union members who work in the non-profit sector (5.8%) is generally representative of the size of that sector's workforce (5.7%).

Figure 1.6 - Demographics of Union Members by Sector, California, 2023-2024

Bars show the share of all workers and the share of union members employed in the public, private, or non-profit sectors. For example, 15.7% of Californians work in the public sector but more than half (52.9%) of all union members work for public sector employers.

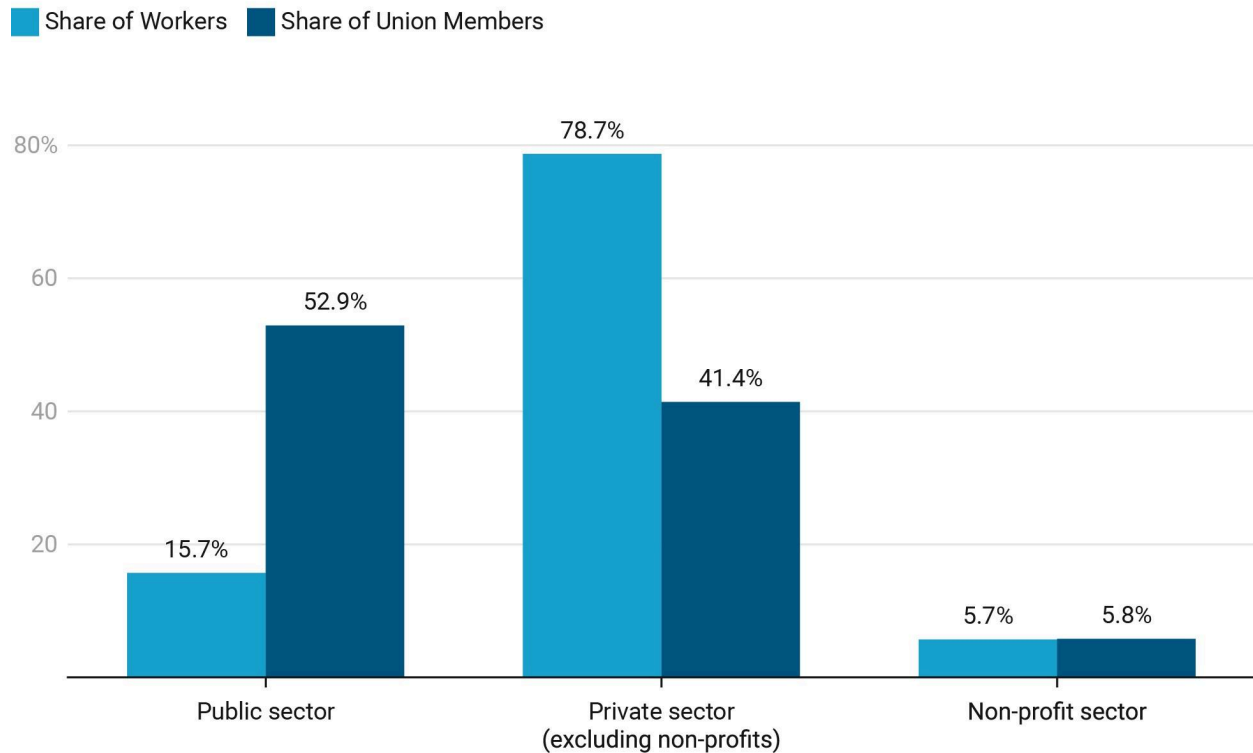


Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: EPI CPS-ORG 2023-2024

Union members trend older than the California workforce

Union members are slightly older than the California workforce overall (see Figure 1.7). The average age of union members is 44 years old. Fewer younger workers are members of unions compared to their share of the workforce. Around one in 10 (11.9%) California workers is between the ages of 16 to 24, yet only 5.4% of union members are under the age of 25.

Figure 1.7 - Demographics of Union Members by Age Group, California, 2023-2024

Bars show the share of all employed workers and the share of union members by age group. For example, 11.9% of all workers are between the ages of 16 to 24. However, only 5.4% of union members belong to that age group.

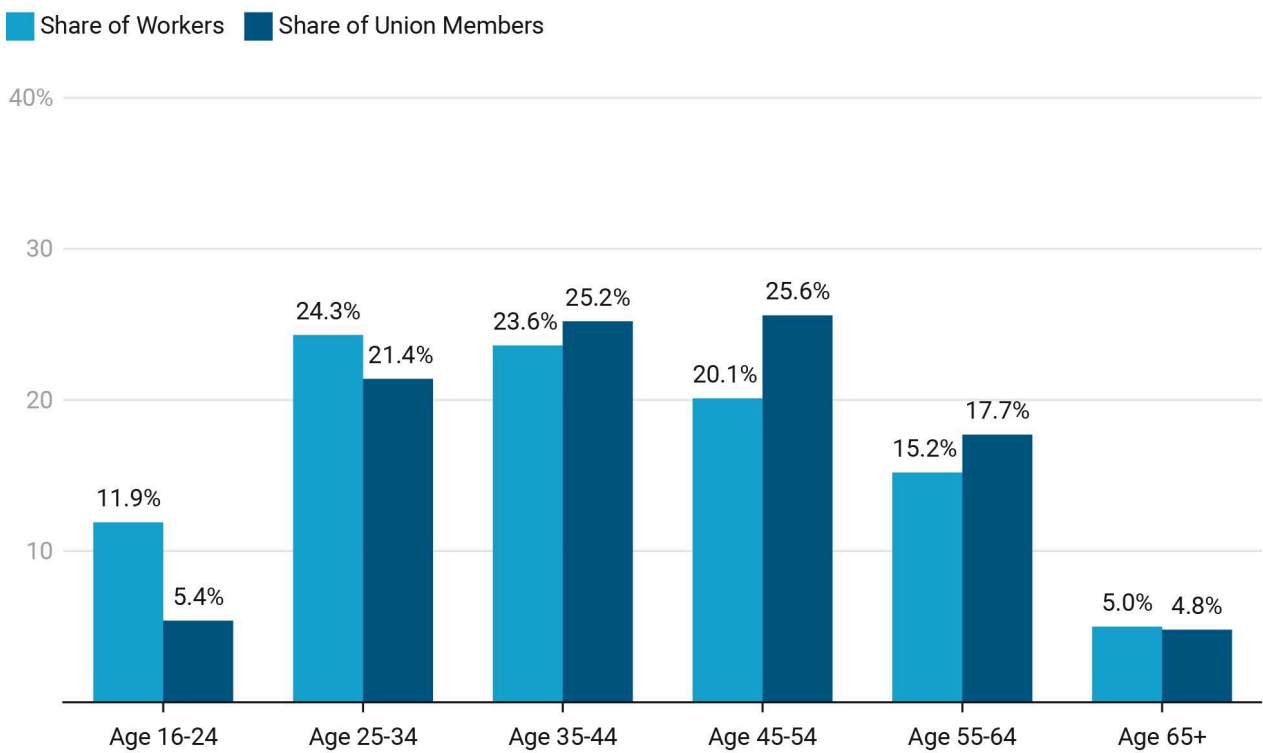


Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: EPI CPS-ORG 2023-2024

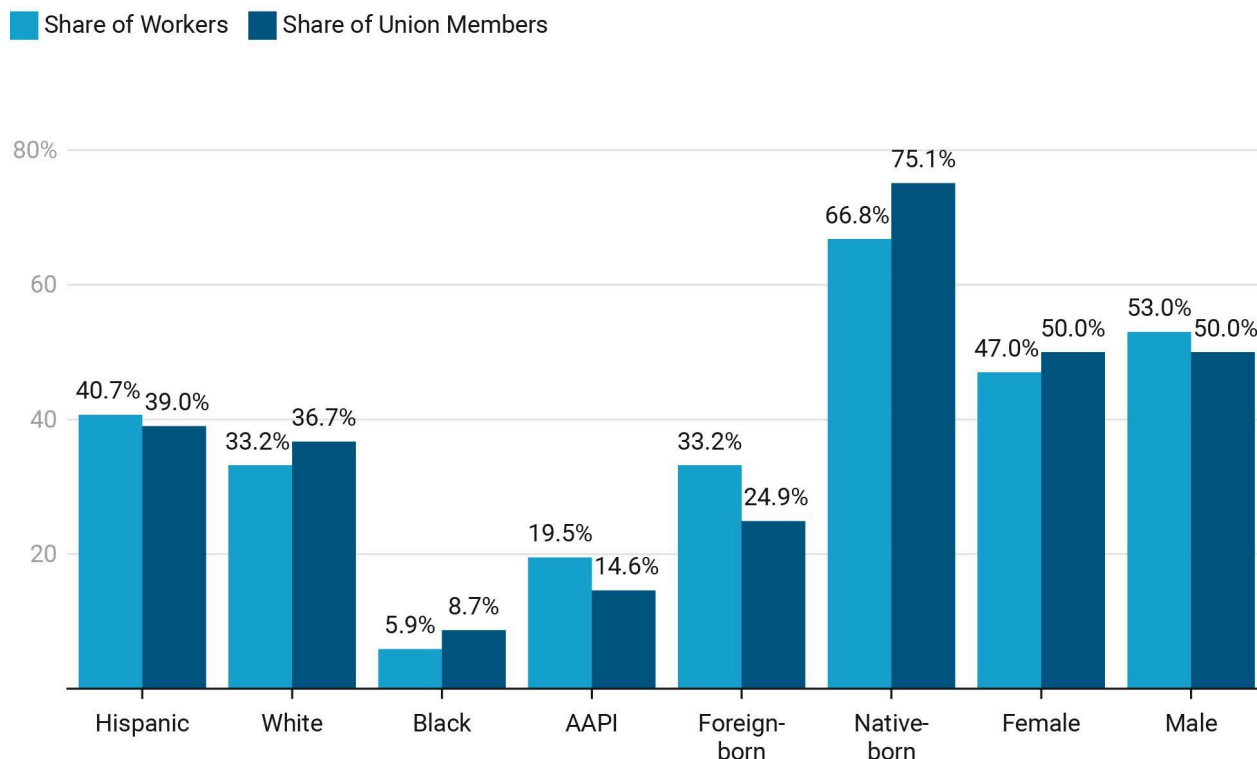
California's union members are diverse, but some groups are underrepresented

California's union members are diverse, but some racial/ethnic groups are underrepresented (see Figure 1.8). The majority of union members are workers of color. Around four out of 10 (39.0%) union members are Hispanic, a rate fairly representative of Hispanic workers' presence in the workforce (40.7%). Non-Hispanic Black workers are overrepresented among union members, making up 8.7% of all union members and 5.9% of the workforce. Non-Hispanic white workers are also overrepresented among union members, making up 36.7% of union members and around a third (33.2%) of the California workforce. Non-Hispanic Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) workers are underrepresented among union members. Around one in seven (14.6%) union members identifies as AAPI, a smaller share than their presence in the workforce (19.5%). A large majority of union members were born in the United States (75.1%), and foreign-born workers are underrepresented among union members, making up a quarter (24.9%) of all union members but a third (33.2%) of the workforce in California.

Half (50.0%) of union members are women, slightly higher than women's percentage of the workforce (47.0%). However, women and workers of color likely make up a larger share of union members than represented by data from the CPS. Critically, these data only represent employed wage and salary workers and do not include workers who are classified as self-employed and run their own businesses. Unionized family child care providers who care for and educate children receiving state-subsidized child care are not represented in the data as small business owners. Additionally, unionized homecare workers providing assistance to older adults and individuals with disabilities through California's In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) program are similarly underrepresented. Between 2023 and 2024, an average of more than 46,900 child care providers were represented by Child Care Providers United (CCPU), and the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and United Domestic Workers (UDW) represented an average of 661,800 homecare providers. The majority of family child care providers and homecare workers are women and workers of color, with a significant share being foreign-born.¹⁰ The CPS data on union membership thus undercount the diversity of California's union membership.

Figure 1.8 - Demographics of Union Members by Race/Ethnicity, Nativity, and Sex, California, 2023-2024

Bars show the share of all workers and the share of union members who belong to each racial/ethnic group, are foreign-born, male and female. For example, half (50.0%) of union members are women, and women make up almost half (47.0%) of all workers.



Racial/ethnic categories are mutually exclusive. Hispanic means Hispanic ethnicity regardless of race. The remaining race/ethnic categories are non-Hispanic.

Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: EPI CPS-ORG 2023-2024

California’s union members have higher levels of education than the workforce overall

Finally, union members have higher levels of educational attainment than the workforce overall (see Figure 1.9). Three out of four union members have some educational experience beyond high school. Almost three in 10 (28.7%) union members have either taken college courses or achieved an associate's degree. More than one in four (27.5%) have a bachelor's degree. And around one in five (19.6%) has an advanced degree. In fact, workers with a high school diploma (or GED) or who did not finish high school are underrepresented among union members relative to their share in the workforce.

Figure 1.9 - Demographics of Union Members by Educational Attainment, California, 2023-2024

Bars show the share of all workers and the share of union members by highest level of educational attainment. For example, 27.5% of union members have a college degree (bachelor's degree), and around 26.8% of all California workers have a college degree.

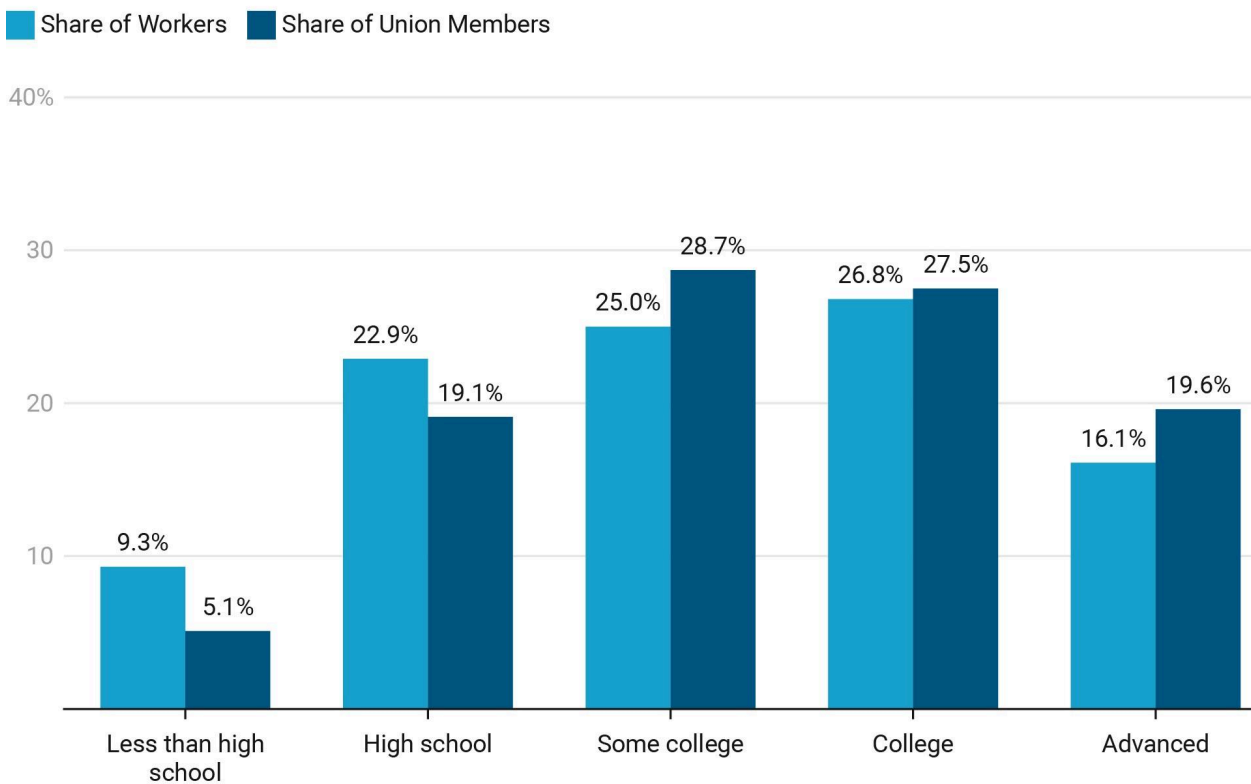


Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: EPI CPS-ORG 2023-2024

Conclusion

California's unions represent a large and remarkably stable share of the state's workforce, defying national trends of long-term decline. While union density in the U.S. has steadily eroded over the past two decades, California has maintained fairly consistent levels of union membership and coverage year after year. This stability reflects ongoing organizing as union density and membership levels fluctuate with economic cycles. But this stability also masks significant variation in union density across industry and between the public and private sectors.

The demographic profile of union members reveals both progress, gaps, and limitations. California's unionized workforce is diverse, older, and highly educated, with significant representation of people of color and women. However, some groups are underrepresented, and major segments of the union workforce—especially women of color and immigrants working in homecare and child care—are missing from standard household survey data, leading to undercounts that obscure the full reach and diversity of union representation in the state.

Taken together, these findings offer a nuanced picture of union workers in California. Unions remain a resilient and integral part of the state's workforce landscape. Recognizing the full scope of who is represented by unions—and where representation gaps remain—is critical to understanding the role of organized labor in shaping job quality, equity, and economic opportunity in California.

Appendix

Data and Methods

Data on long-term trends in union density (coverage and membership) in California and the United States come from Unionstats.¹¹ The remaining analyses of union density by industry, sector, and region and the demographics of union members use the Economic Policy Institute's data extracts from the Current Population Survey Outgoing Rotation Group (CPS-ORG) for the years 2023–2024.¹² The CPS-ORG is a household survey of individuals who report if they are members or represented by a union (or an employee association similar to a union) in their main job only. Union representation and membership may be an undercount as some individuals may fail to recall that they are represented by a union.¹³

When analyzing union density (the share of employed workers who are unionized) we typically reference union coverage (i.e., union-represented workers) instead of union membership. Other work may calculate density among union members or both coverage and membership.¹⁴ We chose union coverage density because we wanted to understand what share of the workforce has collective bargaining rights (regardless of whether or not workers elect to join the union as a member). When analyzing demographic data we reference union membership, i.e., those workers who actively elected to join their unions as members, which typically involves paying dues.

Our sample includes employed civilian wage and salary workers (not self-employed or unpaid family members), with non-zero earnings, age 16 and over, following the methodology of Hirsch and Macpherson (2023).¹⁵ We only include analyses that have at least 50 unweighted observations. Our analysis of metropolitan areas uses Core Based Statistical Areas.

Racial/ethnic categories are mutually exclusive and include: Hispanic ethnicity regardless of race, non-Hispanic white, non-Hispanic Black (including individuals who identify as Black and other racial groups), and non-Hispanic Asian American or Pacific Islander (including individuals who identify as Asian and other racial groups). Due to small sample sizes, we excluded workers identifying as American Indian or Alaska Native, some other race, or multi-racial. CPS data record sex as male or female. Foreign-born means born outside of the United States and includes non-citizens and naturalized citizens.

Data on In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) workers covered by collective bargaining come from the California Department of Social Services Program Data from 2023–2024.¹⁶ Data on family child care providers covered by collective bargaining were obtained through direct correspondence with SEIU/CCPU.

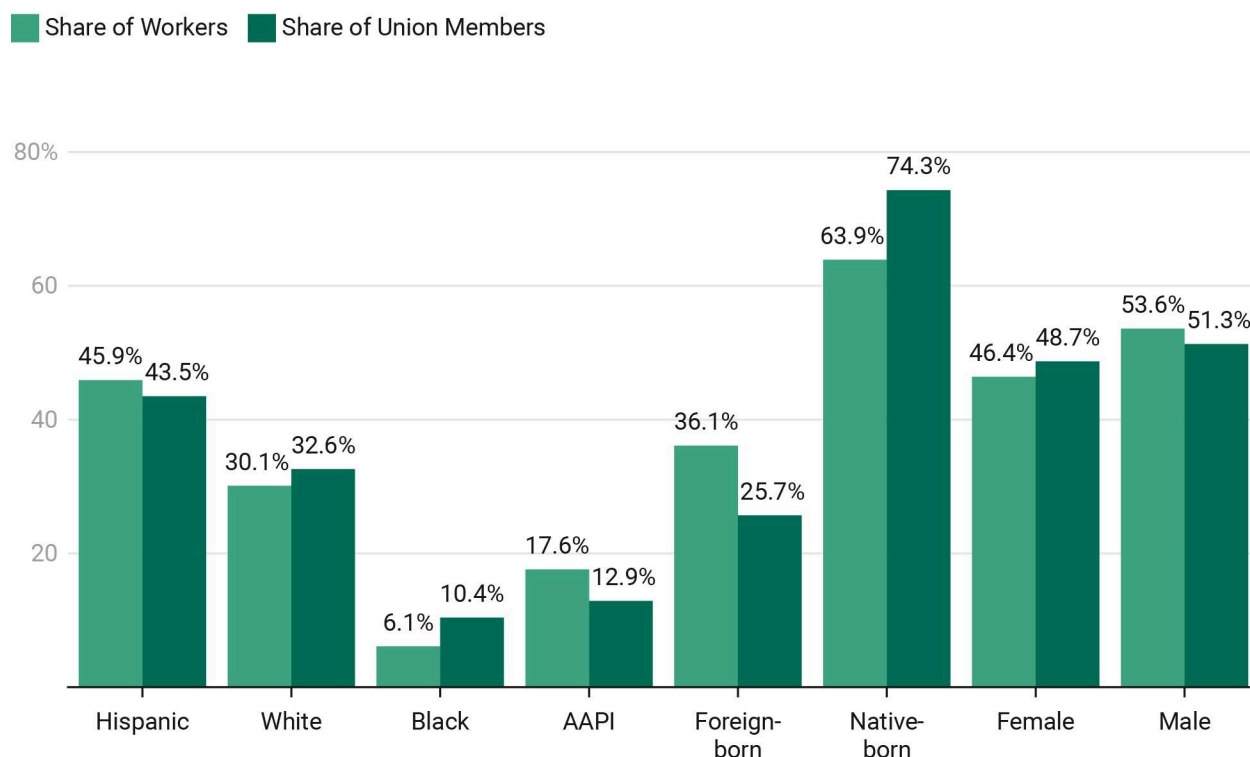
Demographics of Union Members in the Los Angeles Metro and San Francisco Bay Area

Demographic trends in union membership vary geographically in California. Figure 1.10 shows the demographic characteristics of union members and all employed workers across the Los Angeles metropolitan area (LA metro), which includes Los Angeles, Orange, and Ventura Counties.¹⁷

Similar to state-level trends, union members in the LA metro are diverse. The majority of union members are people of color. Hispanic workers make up the largest share of union members, more than four out of 10 (43.5%). Non-Hispanic Black workers make up one in 10 (10.4%) union members and are overrepresented compared to their share in the workforce overall (6.1%). Non-Hispanic Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) workers are underrepresented among union members. About one in eight union members is AAPI (12.9%), but AAPI workers make up more than one in six (17.6%) workers in the LA metro. Around one in three (32.6%) union members is non-Hispanic white, slightly larger than the share of white workers in the workforce (30.1%). As with statewide trends, foreign-born workers are underrepresented. More than one in three workers in the LA metro is foreign-born (36.1%), but foreign-born workers only make up around one in four union members (25.7%). The split between men and women is nearly equal in the LA metro, with women's representation among union members (48.7%) slightly greater than their share of the workforce (46.4%).

Figure 1.10 - Demographics of Union Members by Race/Ethnicity, Nativity, and Sex, Los Angeles Metro Area, 2023-2024

Bars show the share of all workers and the share of union members who belong to each racial/ethnic group, is foreign-born, male and female.



The Los Angeles Metro Area includes Los Angeles, Ventura, and Orange counties.

Racial/ethnic categories are mutually exclusive. Hispanic means Hispanic ethnicity regardless of race. The remaining race/ethnic categories are non-Hispanic.

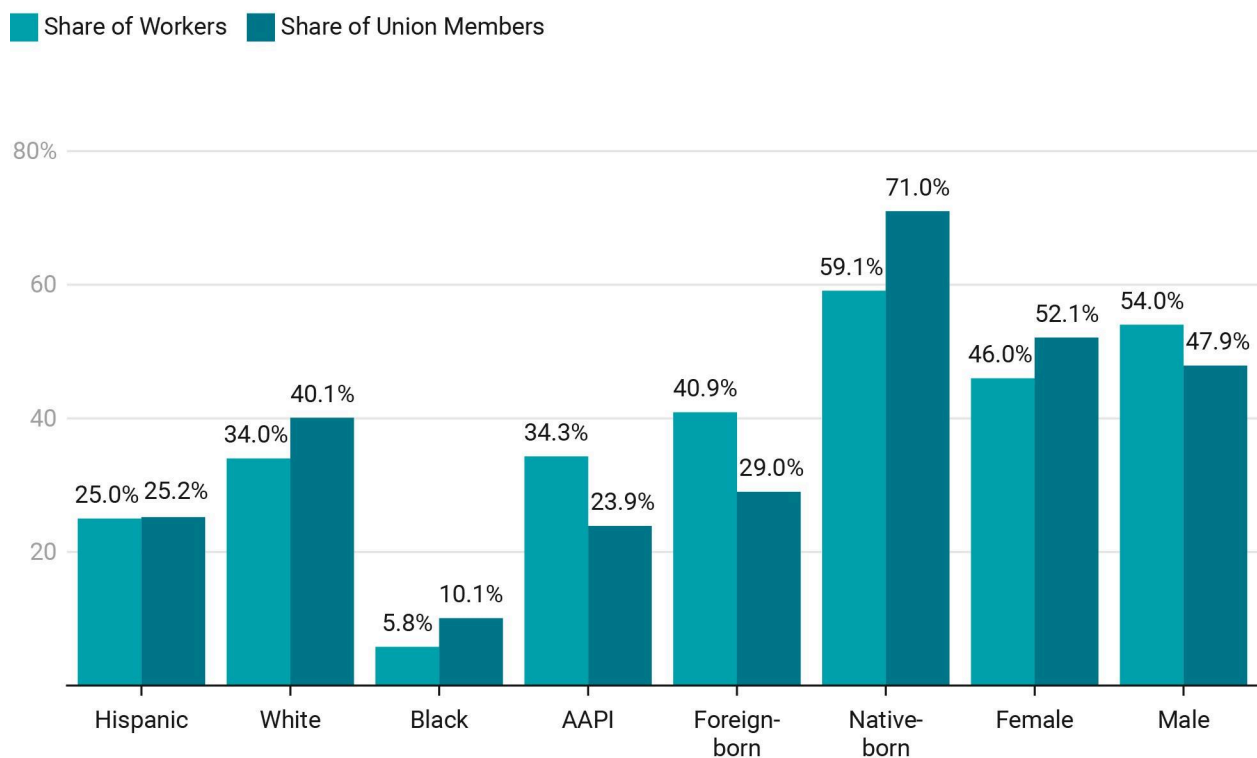
Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: EPI CPS-ORG 2023-2024

Figure 1.11 shows demographic characteristics of union members for the San Francisco Bay Area, which includes San Francisco, Alameda, Santa Clara, Marin, San Mateo, Sonoma, Napa, Contra Costa, and Solano Counties.¹⁸ There are fewer Hispanic workers in the San Francisco Bay Area than in the LA metro, but even so, union membership among Hispanic workers is fairly representative of their share of the workforce. One in four workers is Hispanic (25.0%) and one in four union members is Hispanic (25.2%). As in the LA metro, non-Hispanic white and Black workers are overrepresented among union members relative to their share of the workforce, while Asian American and Pacific Islander workers are underrepresented. One in three (34.3%) workers in the San Francisco Bay Area is AAPI, but less than one in four (23.9%) union members is AAPI. As with broader trends, foreign-born workers are also underrepresented as

they account for four in 10 (40.9%) employed workers but only three in 10 (29.0%) union members. Women account for the majority of union members (52.1%) in the San Francisco Bay Area and are actually overrepresented, making up slightly less than half of all employed workers (46.0%). And men are underrepresented among union members (47.9%) compared to their share of the workforce (54.0%).

Figure 1.11 - Demographics of Union Members by Race/Ethnicity, Nativity, and Sex, San Francisco Bay Area, 2023-2024

Bars show the share of all workers and the share of union members who belong to each racial/ethnic group, is foreign-born, male and female.



The San Francisco Bay Area includes San Francisco, Alameda, Santa Clara, Marin, San Mateo, Sonoma, Napa, Contra Costa, and Solano counties. Racial/ethnic categories are mutually exclusive. Hispanic means Hispanic ethnicity regardless of race. The remaining race/ethnic categories are non-Hispanic.

Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: EPI CPS-ORG 2023-2024

Endnotes

1. There are some important differences between public and private sector union membership. California is not a “right-to-work” state. In the private sector the union and the employer may have a union-security agreement that requires employees to join the union as a member and pay dues within a set period of time, though they may opt out and pay a fee for representation instead. Union security agreements were ruled unconstitutional in the public sector by the Supreme Court in the 2018 *Janus v. AFSCME* decision. See “[Union Dues](#).” National Labor Relations Board. Accessed 7/16/2025.
2. Hirsch, B., D. Macpherson, & W. Even. 2025. “[Union Membership Coverage, and Earnings from the CPS](#).”
3. Milkman, R., and S. Luce. “[Labor Unions and the Great Recession](#).” *Social Consequences of the Great Recession. RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 3, no. 3 (2017): 145–65.
4. Milkman, R., and S. Luce. “[Labor Unions and the Great Recession](#).” *Social Consequences of the Great Recession. RSF: The Russell Sage Foundation Journal of the Social Sciences* 3, no. 3 (2017): 145–65.
5. Chapter 3 of this report offers an analysis of union membership data provided to the government by the unions (as opposed to data provided by workers in the CPS). Using union’s self-reported data, the analysis shows an overall increase in union membership in California between 2023 and 2024. This provides another picture of the state’s union membership.
6. Milkman, R., & J. Van Der Naald. [The State of the Unions 2024: A Profile of Organized Labor in New York City, New York State, and the United States](#). CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, 2024.
7. All jobs in the Public Administration industry are in the public sector. The majority of union-represented workers in Education and Social Service work in the public sector (83.2% and 72.0% respectively).
8. The Manufacturing industry includes a range of occupations. About 40.8% of workers in this industry are in managerial or professional occupations. These workers are less likely to be unionized than workers in other Manufacturing industry occupations. We find union density is much higher among workers employed in production, operation, or technician occupations—which comprises about half (48.3%) of the workforce. Restricted to these three occupations, union density in Manufacturing is 10.6%.
9. However, this gap between the share of all workers employed in Manufacturing and the share of union-represented workers employed in manufacturing declines if restricted to only workers employed in production, operation, or technical occupations (who make up

about half of workers in the industry; see note 7). A range of occupations are employed in the Manufacturing industry in California. Four out of 10 (40.8%) workers are managers or professionals who are less likely to be unionized.

10. CSCCE. *Profiles of the California Early Care and Education Workforce, 2020*. Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, 2022. Rhee, N., K. Jacobs, L. Lucia, et al. *Analysis of the Potential Impacts of Statewide or Regional Collective Bargaining for In-Home Supportive Services Providers*. UC Berkeley Labor Center, 2025.
11. Hirsch, B., D. Macpherson, & W. Even. 2025. "Union Membership Coverage, and Earning from the CPS."
12. Economic Policy Institute. "Current Population Survey Extracts," 2025.
13. Milkman, R., & J. Van Der Naald. *The State of the Unions 2024: A Profile of Organized Labor in New York City, New York State, and the United States*. CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, 2024.
14. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Union Members - 2024*. USDL-25-0105. U.S. Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics. Jan. 28, 2025. | Hirsch, B., D. Macpherson, & W. Even. 2025. "Union Membership Coverage, and Earning from the CPS." (2025). | Milkman, R., & J. Van Der Naald. *The State of the Unions 2024: A Profile of Organized Labor in New York City, New York State, and the United States*. CUNY School of Labor and Urban Studies, 2024.
15. Hirsch, B., D. Macpherson, & W. Even. 2025. "Union Membership Coverage, and Earning from the CPS."
16. CDSS. "In-Home Supportive Services (IHSS) Program Data." 2025. <https://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/ihss/program-data>.
17. We identified the Los Angeles metropolitan area using the Core Based Statistical Areas of Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim and Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura. A note that these two areas are listed separately in Figure 1.3 but have been combined here to allow for a large enough sample size to support an analysis of worker demographics.
18. We identified the San Francisco Bay Area using the following Core Based Statistical Areas: San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont, San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, Santa Rosa-Petaluma, and Vallejo-Fairfield.

CHAPTER 2

Private Sector Union Organizing

UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE)

Justin McBride, Chris Zepeda-Millán, and Cristhian Lin

Introduction

According to data from the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), in 2024, just over 15,000 California private sector workers voted in 283 union elections—about one election per working day.¹ While an impressive number, this accounts for less than 0.1% (or 1 in 1,000) of all California workers, excluding farmworkers.²

In this section of the report, we will take a closer look at data from the NLRB to assess new private sector organizing activity in the state of California in 2024.³ We have selected four key data points to hone in on to better understand new organizing within the state.

The data explored below reveals that much labor organizing occurs within the state, but that these organizing drives are highly concentrated within a limited number of industries and are largely initiated by an even smaller number of unions.

Key Terms	Unions are organized at multiple scales. While every union is structured slightly differently, the most common scales are:
International union	A union's headquarters and the largest organizational scale, which includes all members of the union throughout the U.S. and, often, Canada. International unions are typically denoted by an acronym (ex. SEIU, for Service Employees International Union).
District	A district is typically a geographical subunit of an international union, though in some cases, a specific type of work may have its own district. Sometimes called regions.
Local	A local union is the smallest formally organized level of a union. Locals typically cover a geography, a jurisdiction over a specific type of work, or both in combination. Most unions designate locals with a number (ex. Local 11).
Bargaining unit	A bargaining unit is a group of workers who collectively bargain with their employer. In some unions, every bargaining unit is its own local. In other unions, a single local can have up to dozens of individual bargaining units.

California unions continued to organize the private sector in 2024

Figure 2.1 - RC (New Union Certification) Petitions Filed, U.S. and California, 2015-2024

The bars below show the number of new RC petitions filed in the U.S. from 2015 through 2024. The smaller bar represents activity in California, and the larger, the activity in all other parts of the nation.

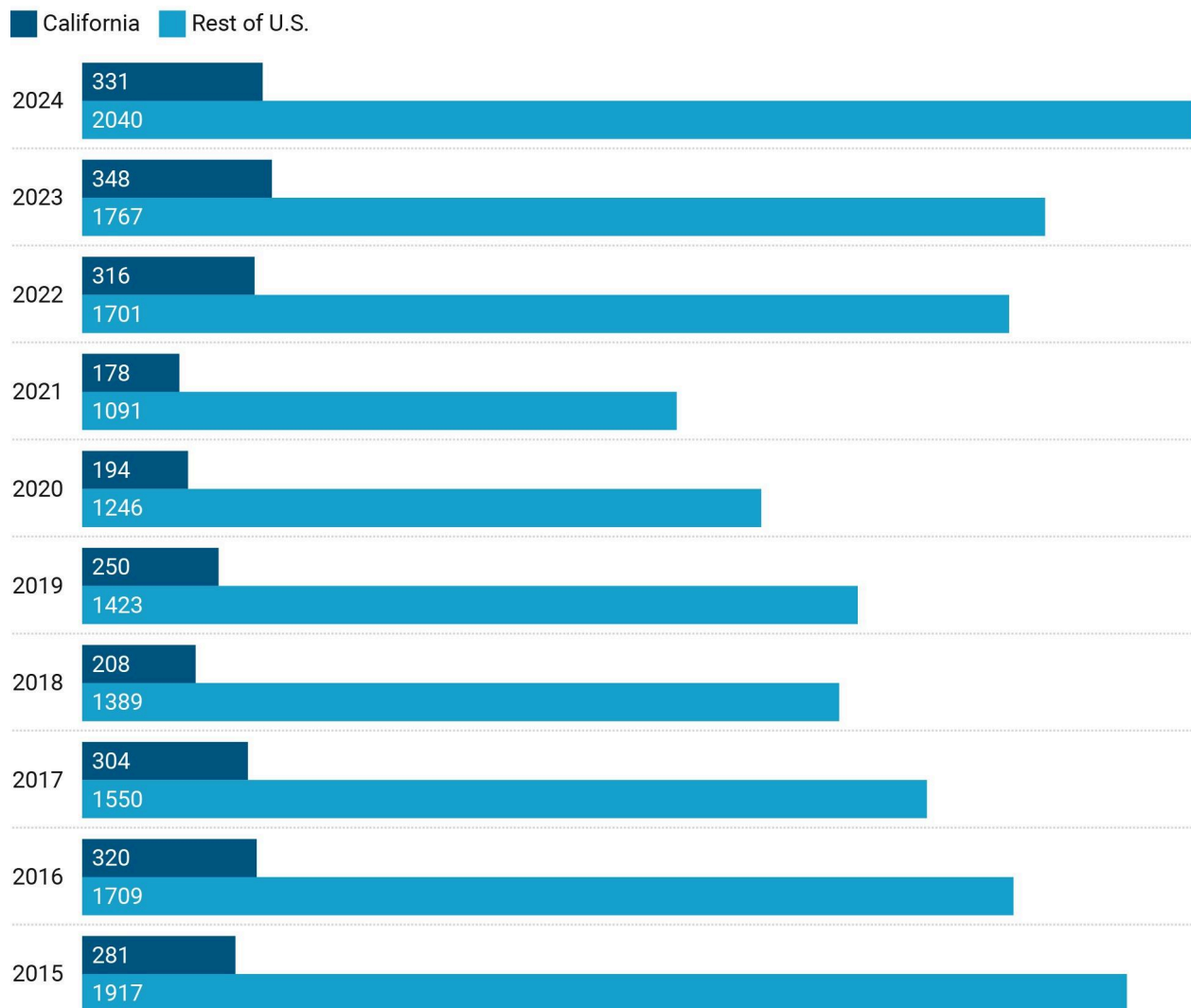


Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: NLRB Case Search

Nationwide, in 2024, workers filed 2,371 RC election petitions (where a union seeks recognition as the collective bargaining agent for a workforce). Unions won in 54.4% of these petitions overall, including petitions that were withdrawn or did not go to a vote in the calendar year, a win rate roughly equivalent to 2023.⁴ This trend tracks to a growing support of unions amongst the working public.⁵

As usual, California accounted for a large proportion of these petitions—roughly 14.0% of all petitions filed nationwide. Overall, this proportion is slightly higher than the state’s population measured as a percentage of the U.S. total population (about 12% in CA)⁶ and substantially higher than the percentage of private sector workers covered by a union contract nationwide (about 9.3% in CA).⁷ About 55% of these in-state petitions were filed in Southern California (ranging from the border with Mexico to roughly the Santa Barbara area and the lower parts of the Central Valley), similar to the population distribution within the state.

California unions enjoyed substantial wins via the NLRB in 2024

Figure 2.2 - NLRB Election Petition Dispositions, California, 2024

The below table shows the number of NLRB petitions either resolved in or filed during 2024, sorted by NLRB petition type. The table also shows the number of workers covered by the petitions, the absolute number of wins and the win rate, and other possible outcomes.

Type of Petition	Filed	Workers Covered	Won	Challenged	Lost	Withdrawn / Dismissed	Unresolved as of 12/31/24	New / Retained Members
RC (Worker Filed Certification)	372	21,600	204	17	40	68	43	18,370
RM (Mgmt Filed Certification)	65	513	20	0	2	32	11	438
RD (Decertification)	52	1,024	9	2	9	25	7	749
Other Election	9	1,377	1	0	1	5	2	42
TOTAL	498	24,514	234	19	52	130	63	19,599

'Won' refers to an outcome favorable to the union. Won (%) calculated as the ratio of Won elections to Won elections and Lost elections, following Bronfenbrenner (2022). This ratio does not include withdrawn petitions. Challenged elections remain unresolved as of 12/31/2024.

Table: UCLA IRLE - Source: NLRB Case Search

Key Terms	The most common NLRB petition types:
RC	A union seeks to represent a workforce, called a proposed bargaining unit.
RD	A bargaining unit currently represented by a union seeks to dissolve that union.
RM	Management requests the NLRB to intervene in a union dispute and resolve whether the union represents a specific group of workers or not. Can only be filed if the union makes a claim of representation.

In total, 498 NLRB election petitions were either filed, outstanding, or resolved in 2024 in California. These covered over 24,500 workers and resulted in just under 19,000 newly represented workers.⁸ This number includes RC petitions (where workers seek recognition for their union), RM petitions (where management seeks to clarify whether a union represents workers or not), RD petitions (where workers want to cease their representation), and several other less common types of NLRB elections (typically around unit clarifications or issues related to dues collection). The 498 petitions include:

- Petitions filed in 2023 that were resolved in 2024
- Petitions filed in 2023 that had still not been resolved at the end of calendar year 2024
- Petitions filed in 2024, whether resolved or not at the end of the calendar year

The bulk of the elections stemmed from unions seeking to represent new workers (RC petitions). In 2024, unions had an 83.6% win rate in RC petitions that went to a vote.⁹ Nationwide, the win rate was only 79.9%, meaning California workers did enjoy slightly higher success than the national average in their attempts to unionize in 2024. These elections brought in just over 18,000 newly represented workers to California's labor movement.

Like the rest of the country, in 2024 California exhibited more RM petitions than usual—petitions filed by management seeking clarification of whether a union truly represents workers it has publicly claimed to represent. While unions have traditionally avoided RM petitions, the 2023 NLRB Cemex decision shifted union strategies towards more overt demands of recognition.¹⁰ It is unclear how the new Trump administration will approach the Cemex ruling, and if this trend will continue in future years.

Most workers had to wait substantial amounts of time for their votes to be certified. For all union-initiated RC votes which were resolved as wins or losses in 2024 (244 in total), the median time between petition and a vote was 47 days. The average time was substantially higher—63 days, or over two months' time between the filing of the petition and the Board certification of results. This lengthier average was in part driven by several multi-year cases, including one case where Google/Alphabet was able to delay certification of a successful union

vote for 532 days—almost one and a half years.¹¹ The national median wait time between petition and vote in 2014 (10 years prior) was 38 days,¹² implying that the amount of time many workers must wait before making their voices heard has increased over the past decade.

Union certification petitions were relatively concentrated in a few sectors of the economy

Figure 2.3 - Number of RC Petitions Filed by Industry, California, 2024

The below table shows the number of 2024 RC petitions filed in California sorted by industry, as defined by four-digit NAICS codes, both in absolute terms and as a percentage of all RC activity.

NAICS Code	NAICS Description	# of RC Petitions	% of all RC Petitions
7225	Snack and nonalcoholic beverage bars	26	10.9%
6221	General medical and surgical hospitals	25	10.5%
6214	Kidney dialysis centers	18	7.5%
6211	Office of mental health physicians	12	5.0%
6113	Colleges and universities	9	3.8%
5312	Offices of real estate agents and brokers	8	3.3%
4561	Pharmacies and drug retailers	7	2.9%
7211	All other traveler accommodation	7	2.9%
various	Other industries (237 total)	210	53.1%

Table: UCLA IRLE - Source: NLRB Case Search

The vast majority of private sector industries in California had five or fewer unionization attempts overseen by the NLRB in 2024. The 322 RC petitions filed by unions in 2024 (clear signs of union organizing activity) covered 245 specific industries.¹³ Of those, only eight industries had more than five unionization attempts. In the aggregate, these eight industries accounted for 47% of all unionization petitions in the state in 2024.

Unsurprisingly, the nonalcoholic beverage bar takes up the largest industry for activity as measured by the number of RC petitions filed, at roughly 11%. This is largely due to the Starbucks campaign of Workers United, an SEIU affiliate. In 2024, the Starbucks campaign

continued to be a major effort for Workers United, both in California and beyond. The union organized its first Starbucks shop in Buffalo in 2021, and although it has yet to sign a collective bargaining agreement with the firm, in 2024, Workers United made progress in negotiations.¹⁴ In addition to the California activity from this nationwide Starbucks effort, several organizing drives led by a variety of other unions occurred at other coffee shop chains in the state. It should be noted that, due to the small unit size of individual coffeehouse establishments, the actual percentage of workers covered by RC petitions in this industry is substantially smaller.

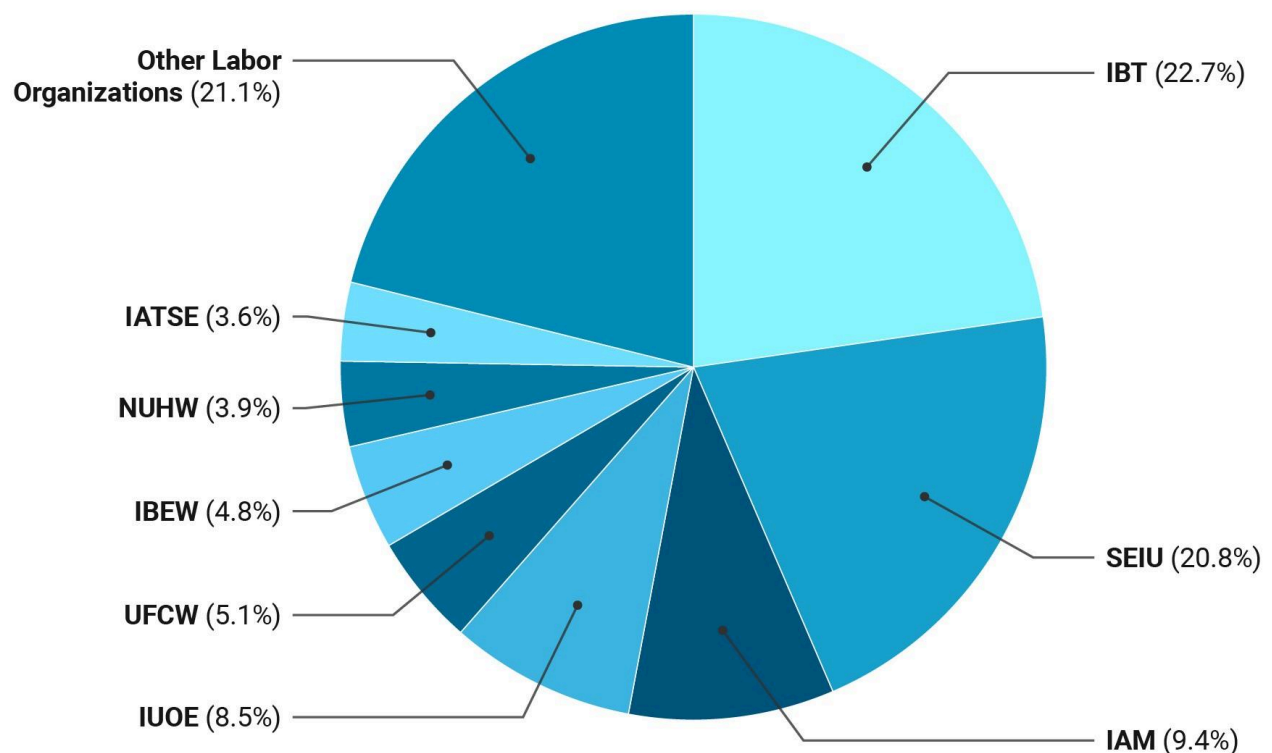
The next three key industries are all a part of a broader health care sector. Several highly active California healthcare unions engaged in large healthcare organizing drives in 2024, including SEIU United Healthcare Workers (UHW), the National Union of Health Care Workers (NUHW), the California Nurses Association (CNA), and two AFSCME-affiliated locals: United Nurses Associations of California (UNAC) and Union of American Physicians and Dentists (UAPD). UHW was particularly active in organizing drives at dialysis clinics in 2024, filing 18 petitions (about three every two months), as part of a long-term statewide effort to organize and improve the dialysis industry.

The fifth industry on the list goes to higher education workers. Note that this list only covers the private sector, meaning some large successful organizing drives in public sector higher education are not included in this figure. For example, the SEIU-affiliated California State University Employees Union (CSUEU) organized a huge bargaining unit of several tens of thousands of undergraduate workers in the California State University system in 2024. The nine petitions reflected in the private-sector side of higher education come from a variety of privately-owned universities, including drives by the UAW at the University of Southern California (USC) and at California Institute of Technology (CalTech), and by SEIU Local 721 at the University of San Diego, Loyola Marymount University, and Occidental College.

A few key unions are responsible for the majority of private sector organizing in the state

Figure 2.4 - RC Petitions Filed by Parent Union, California, 2024 (331 total)

This chart shows the percentages of all RC petitions filed in California in 2024, sorted by international union.

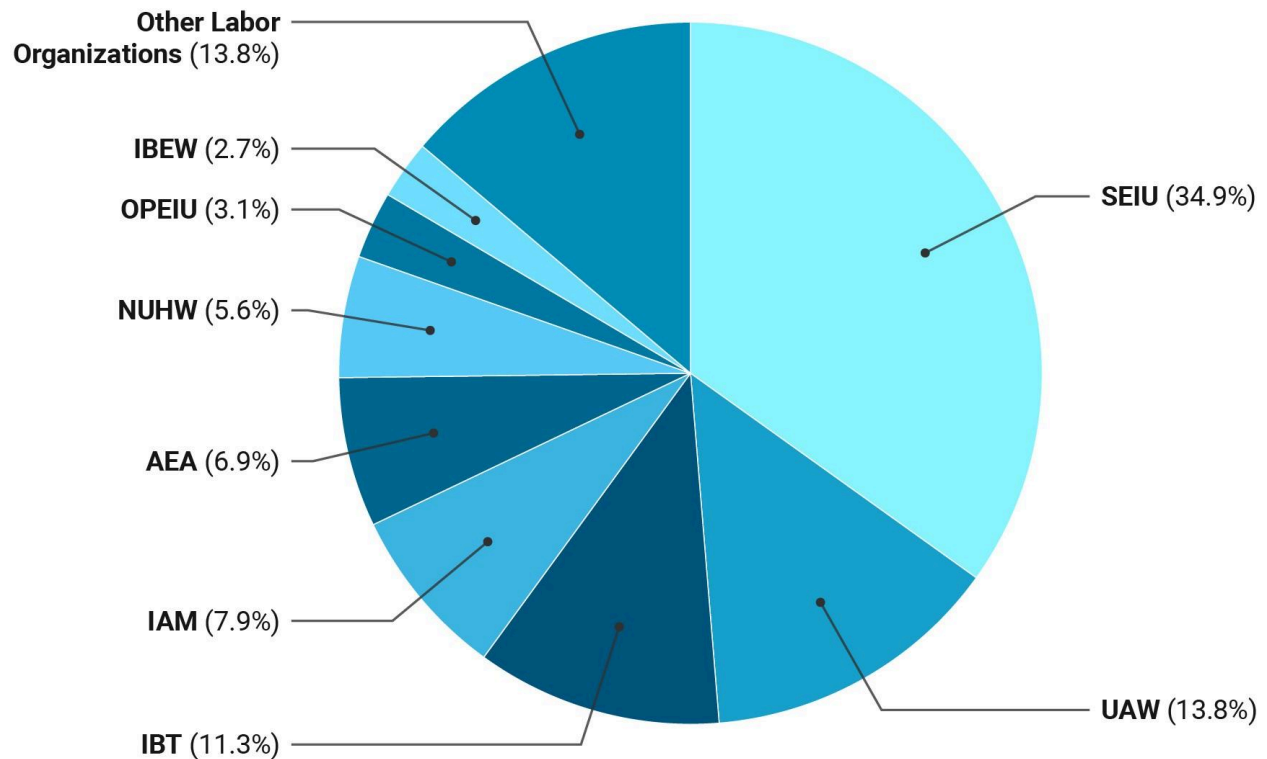


IBT = Teamsters. IAM = Machinists. IUOE = Operating Engineers. IBEW = Electrical Workers. NUHW = National Union of Healthcare Workers. IATSE = Theatrical Stage Employees.

Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: NLRB Case Search

Figure 2.5 - Number of Workers Covered by RC Petition by Parent Union, California, 2024 (24,589 in total)

This chart shows the number of workers covered by all 2024 California RC petitions, sorted by international union.



UAW = Autoworkers. IBT = Teamsters. IAA = Machinists. AEA = Actors' Equity Association. NUHW = National Union of Healthcare Workers. OPEIU = Office and Professional Employees International Union. IBEW = Electrical Workers.

Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: NLRB Case Search

Twenty-nine national unions had at least one affiliated region or local that filed at least one RC petition in California. These ranged from giants like the Service Employees International Union (SEIU) and the Teamsters, all the way down to much smaller unions like the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or Wobblies) and the Pacific Northwest Staff Union. Seven independent unions, where workers sought recognition without the backing of a larger labor organization, also filed petitions in 2024.

Despite this organizational breadth, the number of new organizing petitions was highly concentrated in the hands of a few unions. Several of these unions are amongst the largest in the state (SEIU and the Teamsters occupy the top two spots in terms of membership). Some

organizing activity may not be captured, for example, labor unions that used non-NLRB supervised pathways to union recognition (such as card check recognition).

Three unions together filed over half of all RC petitions in California in 2024—the Teamsters (IBT, 22.7%), SEIU (20.8%), and the International Association of Machinists (IAM, 9.4%). Four other unions account for the next quarter of petitions filed. Put another way, seven unions filed over 75% of all RC petitions in California in 2024, and 29 unions (including small independent units) filed the remainder.

SEIU appears high on the list due to its organizing activity in several sectors. The Starbucks campaign, waged by SEIU-affiliated Workers United, continued to generate strong organizing leads in California and beyond. Indeed, in 2024, Workers United filed 27 RC petitions for individual Starbucks establishments in California—about 8% of all RC petitions statewide. SEIU United Healthcare Workers West (UHW) was also highly active, organizing in a variety of industries within the private healthcare sector. Other SEIU affiliates may have filed fewer petitions, but almost all major SEIU locals in California filed for at least one RC election petition in 2024.

Measured by the number of workers rather than number of petitions, the picture changes somewhat. Over one in three workers covered by an RC petition sought to vote on representation by SEIU. This number is driven primarily by UHW organizing drives at large hospitals. For example, a drive at Sharp Metropolitan Hospital in San Diego, the second largest unit filed in 2024, held a successful election in July covering about 2,100 workers. Another SEIU affiliate, Local 721, sought representation certification for several large academic units in the private sector in 2024 (see previous section for details).

The UAW is second on the list, covering 13.8% of workers who sought recognition last year. Although the UAW sought elections at only a small number of bargaining units, these were primarily in the private higher education sector and were well above average in size. The UAW continued to build on its success in higher education organizing in 2024, springboarding from a successful University of California system-wide strike in 2022, which led to substantial wage increases for teaching assistants and academic workers (the union claims this was the largest strike in US higher education history¹⁵). With just two petitions at the University of Southern California (USC) and the California Institute of Technology (CalTech) (the largest and third largest units filed in 2024, respectively), the UAW sought representation from over 4,500 new members. CalTech workers won in January, while USC was filed in December and had not yet had an election at year's end.

The Teamsters is third, with 11.3%, largely a result of the high volume of smaller units where they sought elections. The largest unit the Teamsters petitioned for was only 320 workers (a Breyer's Ice Cream facility in Tulare), and the average size of proposed bargaining units petitioned by the Teamsters was only 44 workers.

These three unions alone—SEIU, the UAW, and the Teamsters—accounted for just under 60% of all workers covered by an RC petition in 2024. No other union achieved 10% of workers covered.

Conclusion

California unions had an active 2024, consistent with the state's status as a key site for the movement as a whole. The data in this chapter illustrate that the California labor movement has been able to accelerate its organizing of new union bargaining units, with the number of RC petitions increasing over the last decade from 281 in 2015 to 331 in 2024, votes which covered over 24,500 workers. In addition, organized labor in the Golden State had an impressive 83.6% win-rate in the 498 NLRB election petitions that were completed or filed last year, exceeding the national win-rate.

While impressive, the data also show that most of this successful new union organizing has been concentrated in only a few sectors (the medical industry as well as snacks and nonalcoholic beverage bars), and by a handful of unions (SEIU, UAW, and the Teamsters). The fact that only 9.3% of private sector workers in California are represented by unions, despite 70% of Californians (and 75% of likely voters) approving of labor unions,¹⁶ suggests that the labor movement has an opportunity to substantially grow in “the state of resistance.”¹⁷

Endnotes

1. All data presented on NLRB activity in the State of California in this chapter comes from the authors' analysis of NLRB election disposition data, publicly reported on the NLRB website and retrieved at various times throughout the 2024 and 2025 calendar years. "[Case Search](#)," National Labor Relations Board. Accessed October 8, 2024.
2. Based on a total non-farm labor market of 18,075,400. CA EDD. 2025. [2024 California Jobs Market Briefing](#). Government Report: State of California Labor and Workforce Development Agency, Employment Development Department. Rep. no. DE 864 Rev.2 (8-24).
3. Unfortunately, there is no central repository for data on public sector union organizing within the state. As such, this section focuses only on a portion of California's vibrant and active labor movement.
4. "[Report: Representation Petitions – RC](#)," National Labor Relations Board. Accessed February 12, 2025.
5. Sojourner, A. & A. Reich. "[Americans Favor Labor Unions Over Big Business Now More Than Ever](#)," Working Economics Blog blogpost, Economic Policy Institute. May 20, 2025. Retrieved June 16, 2025.
6. Based on values reported in the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey Total Population 5-Year Estimates, Table B01003, 2023.
7. Hirsch, B., D. Macpherson, & W. Even. 2024. "[Union Membership Coverage, and Earnings from the CPS](#)." Retrieved February 12, 2025.
8. An additional 749 workers were retained in the face of RD, or decertification, petitions won by their unions.
9. Measured as the ratio of wins to the total of wins and losses. This ratio follows the methodology used by Bronfenbrenner, K. 2022. *In Solidarity: Removing Barriers to Organizing*. Testimony before the United States House Committee on Education and Labor. September 14, 2022. This method does not count withdrawals as losses. Unions often withdraw petitions if they suspect an imminent loss, but they also may withdraw petitions for a number of other reasons. Recalculating the ratio with withdrawals as 'losses,' California unions won 65% of votes—11 percentage points higher than the nationwide average.
10. The *Cemex* ruling lowered the bar for NLRB-mandated bargaining orders, creating a new pathway for recognition. Under *Cemex*, when a union has demanded recognition and the NLRB determines that management subsequently committed severe Unfair Practice Charges without first seeking an RM petition, the Board will order the company to recognize the union and bargain in good faith. The sharp uptick in RM petitions in 2024 nationwide is almost certainly a result of this change in policy. See Abruzzo, J. 2024. *Guidance in Response to Inquiries about the Board's Decision in Cemex Construction Materials Pacific, LLC*. National Labor Relations Board Office of the General Counsel Memorandum GC 24-01 (Revised). Apr. 29, 2024.
11. NLRB Case no. 20-RC-319743. [Accenture d/b/a AccentureFlex; Google, LLC/Alphabet Inc. \(as joint employers\)](#). Accessed February 25, 2025.

12. LaJeunesse, R. "Union Organizing and the NLRB Under President Obama." *Federalist Society Review* 13, no. 3 (2013): 107-116.
13. All employers in California are required to self-report their NAICS code to the California Employment Development Department (EDD). By comparing employer names and addresses contained within NLRB petitions with the EDD dataset, hand-coding their 6-digit self-reported NAICS codes, and truncating those to the 4-digit NAICS level, we have analyzed which industrial sectors California's unions have been most active in organizing under the NLRB. NAICS codes are used by the federal government to track industrial activity by output. California Employment and Development Department dataset. "Find Employers." Accessed December 5, 2024.
14. Uhlmann, N.E. 2024. How Workers Brought Starbucks To The Bargaining Table. *In These Times*. Feb. 28, 2024.
15. Jaime, R. & Y. Li. "How University of California Workers Won The Biggest Higher-Ed Strike in US History." *Jacobin*. Sep. 2, 2023.
16. "Union Members in California—2024." US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2025) and Baldassare, M., D. Bonner, L. Mora and D. Thomas. "PPIC Statewide Survey: Californians and their Economic Wellbeing." *Public Policy Institute of California* (2024).
17. Pastor, M. *State of Resistance*. New York: The New Press, 2018.

CHAPTER 3

Union Membership by Organization

UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE)

Justin McBride, Chris Zepeda-Millán, and Cristhian Lin

Introduction

This section of the report uses Office of Labor-Management Standards (OLMS) data to explore the relative sizes and one-year changes in membership reported by California unions in 2024. The data show a California labor movement that reported an overall increase in reported membership in 2024. However, a few unions reported modest losses in 2024.

A Note on Methodology

The OLMS is a branch of the federal government, housed in the US Department of Labor (DOL), which oversees labor and management transparency requirements. All incorporated union organizations (headquarters, districts, or locals) that represent at least one private sector employee, or any employees in the federal public sector, must provide annual reports (called LM reports, for labor-management) to the OLMS, which include detailed accounting of union finances, leadership, and other key data. The OLMS makes all of these reports publicly available through its Online Public Disclosure Room, dating back to the year 2000.

There are several types of LM reports, the characteristics of which vary by union size. Regardless of which report is used, all include a requirement to provide accurate data on union membership. The OLMS mandates that unions report “the number of members in the labor organization at the end of the reporting period.”¹ Unions explicitly are not supposed to report “employees who make payments in lieu of dues” in this figure; the number must reflect those who have affirmatively joined the labor organization in some way. Even so, this instruction does create some individual leeway within labor organizations in how they account for membership.² Nonetheless, barring internal instances where union administrators decide to change reporting standards, the data can be used to get a rough sense of how union membership has changed at any individual labor organization from year to year.

For this section, we analyzed all California labor organizations’ last two LM reports, from their fiscal years 2023 and 2024. Note that these fiscal years may not align exactly, but every report does cover a 12-month period. We hand-sorted these reported values by international union, and eliminated any duplicated values (for example, any members counted both at the local and district levels). This left us with 827 individual labor organizations that had filed LM reports in

both 2023 and 2024. Grouping these by international union, we had 55 total organizations to include in our analysis, ranging from SEIU on the large end to the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers Union (AWPPW), and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or Wobblies) on the small. An additional 86 LM reports came from independent, unaffiliated local unions.

Importantly, OLMS data has some limitations. Foremost, unions that solely and uniquely represent state or local public sector employees are not regulated by the OLMS and do not have to provide LM reports. Most public sector unions in California have a mix of public sector and private sector membership; these unions report their membership data for the organization as a whole, rather than only for their private-sector divisions. For example, SEIU Local 721, which primarily represents government workers at a variety of Southern California local governments, also has members at several private-sector employers, and thus must report membership data local-wide.

Yet some unions do not have such a mix of represented workers, and thus have not filed annual reports. Notably, this excludes several large union locals, among them:

- AFSCME Local 3299 (University of California (UC) employees);
- UAW Local 4811 (graduate student employees and some researchers throughout the UC system);
- SEIU Local 1000 (State of California employees);
- The California Faculty Association (CFA), an SEIU affiliate that represents tenure-track and non-tenure-track faculty at the California State University (CSU) system;
- The California State University Employees Union (CSUEU), another SEIU affiliate that represents a wide variety of non-instructional CSU career staff and undergraduate student employees;
- United Domestic Workers (UDW), an AFSCME affiliate that represents homecare workers in several counties.

Each of the above organizations has members well into the five-figure range. K-12 teachers unions are also largely missing from this data. There are countless other smaller but uniquely public sector locals as well. Despite these issues, overall OLMS data can give a rough idea of where unions are within the state. None of the above locals would likely drastically shift the size equation listed below, with the possible exception of AFSCME moving up one or more spots on the top ten list. Note that most AFSCME members from state agencies and local governments were reported via the union's two California District Councils, which represent public-private mixes of employees and thus reported all members.

Secondly, OLMS data does not disaggregate by physical location of the member in question. While most international unions are based on the East Coast, two notable entertainment unions based in Los Angeles reported membership data at the nationwide level, rather than for the state. As such, SAG-AFTRA (representing actors) and the Writers Guild of America West

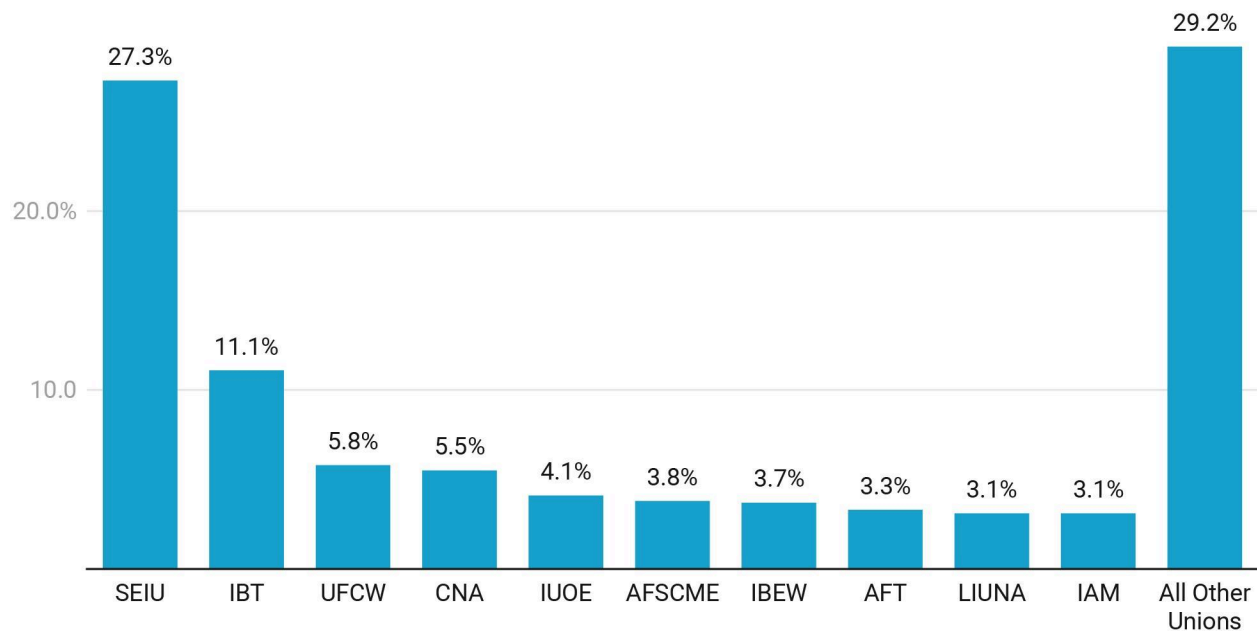
(representing screenwriters) were left out of this analysis, though doubtless the lion's share of their members do reside within the Golden State.

Nonetheless, while imperfect, OLMS data can provide a useful window into union size and short-term changes in reported membership levels for most California labor organizations.

California union membership is highly concentrated under a few international unions

Figure 3.1 - Union Membership by International Union, California, 2024

This chart shows the relative membership values for all California unions, aggregated by international union. The chart breaks out the top 10 internationals. The overall membership is 2,431,829. See the appendix for a table with breakdowns by all international unions.



See text for limitations on OLMS data. Does not include SAG-AFTRA or WGAW, which do not disaggregate members at the state level. IBT= Teamsters. CNA = California Nurses Assn. IUOE = Operating Engineers. IBEW = Electrical Workers. AFT = American Fed. of Teachers. LIUNA = Laborers.

Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: OLMS Online Public Disclosure Room

Our analysis of OLMS data shows that in 2024, the California labor movement reported over 2,431,830 members. Note that this number is slightly larger than, but relatively close to, the number estimated by the Current Population Survey (CPS, examined in Chapter 1 of this report). A count of roughly 2.43 million union members is certainly in the same range as recent CPS estimates. Given the different methodologies used between the OLMS analysis used in this chapter and the Census's sampling methodology, the similarity in numbers is remarkably close. The CPS average for the past five years is 2.48 million.

Over one in four of these reported union members were represented by SEIU—665,619 members in all. As mentioned above, this is likely an undercount, as it does not include SEIU Local 1000, which represents many employees of the State of California, or the CFA and CSUEU, which represent distinct bargaining units of CSU employees. Over one in three of the reported SEIU members (37.0%) belong to SEIU Local 2015, the largest union local in the nation, which represents both homecare workers and long-term care workers in many counties of the state. Another 18.7% of SEIU's members belong to UHW, the healthcare local that represents workers in hospitals and clinics. Other key locals include SEIU Local 721 (18.7% of SEIU members) and 1021 (8.3% of SEIU members), which represent public sector workers in Southern California and the Bay Area respectively, and USWW, the statewide janitors' local (7.3% of SEIU members).

The Teamsters represented just over one in ten California union members—a reported 271,600 members. Teamsters represent a wide variety of workers throughout the state, including cannery workers, delivery drivers, film studio drivers, public sector employees, and brewery workers. As discussed in the prior chapter, the Teamsters are among the most aggressive organizing unions within the state.

As noted in the methodological section above, AFSCME's size of 91,876 is certainly an undercount. One of California's major AFSCME locals, Local 3299, which represents a wide variety of service and technical employees of the University of California system, does not file OLMS forms. The union likely represents over 35,000 workers,³ though not all are members of the union in the open-shop public sector environment. The even larger UDW local, which represents homecare workers and childcare workers in several counties throughout the state, also did not file an LM report in 2023 or 2024. UDW reported over 78,000 members in their 2022 LM-4 form.⁴ Even conservatively, then, AFSCME is probably at least twice as large as it appears via OLMS analysis.

Three key building trades unions appear in the top ten list. The International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE, at 100,890 members), the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW, at 90,574 members), and the Laborers International Union of North America (LIUNA, at 75,484 members) all represent sizable chunks of California's overall reported union membership. Notably, each of these Building Trades unions also represent workers outside of construction sites. Also of note, the IBEW figure is likely an undercount here. IBEW Local 18, which represents Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) employees, does not

report to OLMS and is thus not included. LADWP employs over 12,000 workers, though not all are members of Local 18.⁵

Beyond these top ten unions, California's labor movement includes 55 other international unions, and dozens of smaller independent unions to boot. All of these organizations together represent about three in ten California union members. On average, these unions represent about 15,000 people each. The smallest union with members in California was the Association of Western Pulp and Paper Workers Union (AWPPW), which had just under 300 members in 2024, followed by the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW, or Wobblies) with just over 500 members in-state.

Not all California unions reported higher membership between 2023 and 2024

Myriad factors can go into whether a union reports higher or lower membership from year to year. Figure 3.2 shows changes in reported membership by California unions varied substantially between the end of 2023 and the end of 2024, though it provides little indication as to why.

Some unions reported much higher membership in 2024, with two unions reporting over an 18.0% change from the prior year. Of the 55 international unions that reported to the OLMS, 34 (61.8%) reported higher membership in 2024, and 19 (34.5%) reported lower membership.

On average, however, most California unions reported exiting 2024 much as they entered it. The average change in reported union membership statewide was 1.9%. This in all amounted to a 3.0% increase for the overall labor movement—about 73,000 net increase in members.

See the appendix to this chapter for a table with the reported membership and rate of change, aggregated by international union for every California organization.

Figure 3.2 - Membership Change by International Union, California, 2023-2024

This chart shows the percent change in membership for each aggregated international union with members in California between 2023 and 2024.

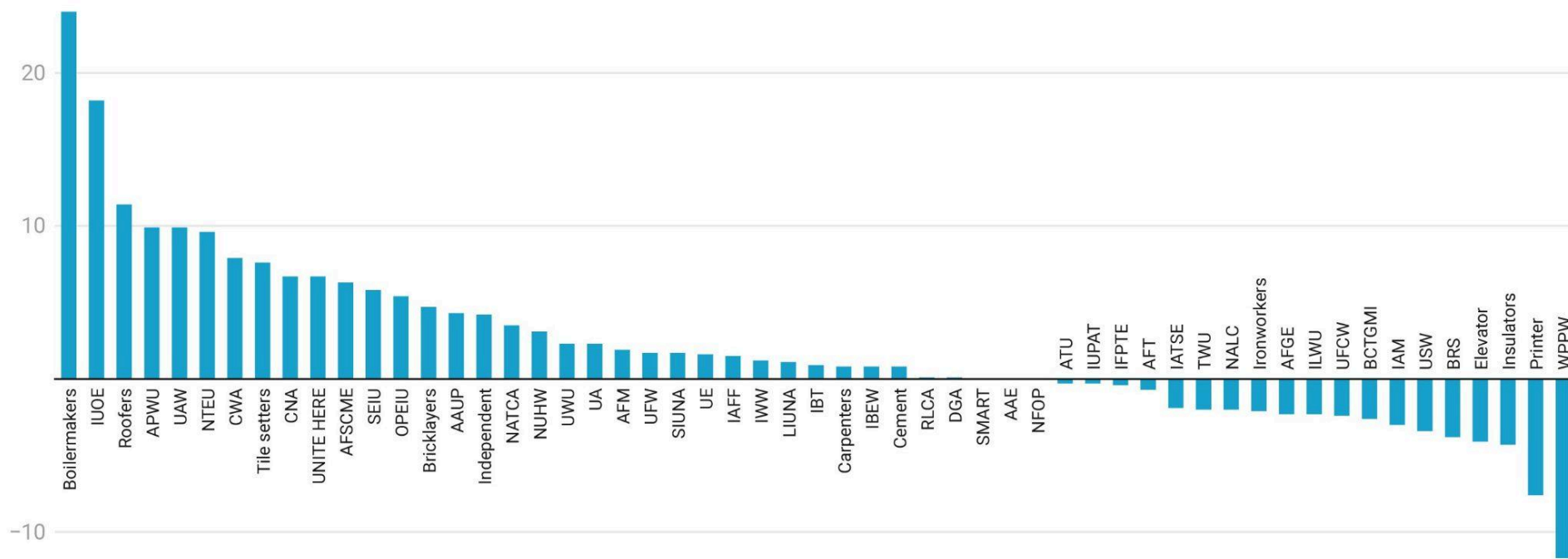


Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: OLMS Online Public Disclosure Room

Some California unions reported large increases in membership in 2024

The ten unions reporting the biggest increase in reported membership (as measured by the change in reported numbers) within the state reported 87,000 more members in 2024. Unions might grow in membership for any number of reasons. New organizing is one obvious pathway. In the private sector, increases in hiring can easily lead to increases in membership when union security clauses are in a contract. Thus, as signatory firms expand, the number of union members can also increase. Some factors that could be less beneficial to workers might also increase union membership. For example, a shift from fewer full-time to more part-time staffing could increase the absolute number of union members. OLMS data does not indicate the reason behind reported increases.

About 41.9% of the reported increase in union members statewide came from SEIU affiliates. The union reported 36,000 additional members in 2024. This impressive number was a 5.8% increase in reported membership for the massive California union.

Notably, the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) and the Boilermakers Union each reported large growth in absolute numbers, but also with respect to the percent growth of their unions overall (18.2% and 24.0%, respectively). These were the two unions reporting the highest percent change in the state in 2024.

The American Postal Workers Union (APWU) showed substantial growth in reported membership in 2024 as well. As a federal public sector union, the APWU operates in an open shop environment. New employees resulting from any growth of the US Postal Service (USPS) must affirmatively join the union to become a member. This suggests that to report 3,000 more members, APWU had to sign up an average of more than 8 new members every day statewide—a laudable accomplishment.

Figure 3.3 - Increases in Union Membership by International Union, California, 2023-2024

This table shows the reported increases in California union membership from 2023 to 2024, aggregated by international union. The second column shows the absolute number of new reported members between 2023 and 2024, and the final column shows what percent increase this represented for the union. The last row is an aggregation of the 23 other unions that reported increases in membership.

Union	New Members	Rate of Increase
SEIU	36,477	5.8%
IUOE	15,508	18.2%
CNA	8,416	6.7%
AFSCME	5,431	6.3%
UNITE HERE	3,550	6.7%
CWA	3,016	7.9%
APWU	3,005	9.9%
IBT	2,413	0.9%
Boilermakers	1,100	24.0%
UA	880	2.3%
Other unions that reported increases	7,360	2.3%

IUOE = Operating Engineers. CNA = California Nurses Association. CWA = Communication Workers of America. APWU = American Postal Workers Union. IBT = Teamsters. UA = Plumbers and Pipefitters.

Table: UCLA IRLE. - Source: OLMS Online Public Disclosure Room.

A few California unions reported modest decreases in membership for 2024

Nineteen unions self-reported lower membership in 2024. Only three of those reported decreases of more than 1,000 members. In all, these 19 unions reported just under 12,000 fewer members in 2024, modestly offsetting the net increase in reported membership made by other unions.

Unions might report a lower membership from year to year for any number of reasons. Obviously, business closings or lay-offs would have an impact on union membership, but other factors could also play a role. Automation of jobs could limit new hiring to replace existing workers. In public sector unions which operate in open shop environments, like the Letter Carriers (NALC) or Machinists (IAM)—which both represent federal employees⁶—it may simply reflect the timing of recruitment drives, since membership reports in an LM report reflect a snapshot of membership.

Not all reasons for a drop in reported membership may be negative. A drastic shift from part-time to full-time work due to a successful new contract clause might result in an on-paper drop in membership, for example. Or a change in how the union tallies its dues-paying members could also shift their count year-to-year.

Nonetheless, some of the unions above experienced challenges in 2024 that could have contributed to their lower reported membership. Grocery stores ramped up embraces of automation in 2024, which the UFCW has reported has led to a sharp drop in employee staffing hours nationwide.⁷ In addition, UFCW Local 770 in Los Angeles lost a major plant, the Farmer John's facility in Vernon, which closed in 2023.⁸ The timing of the annual reports may have led these losses to show up during fiscal year 2024, the first year without any dues-payers as members of the union.

For its part, the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) experienced a particularly difficult year in 2024, as a continued contraction in television and film production in-state resulted in a stagnant sector.⁹ Work slowed for almost every major category of entertainment production within California in 2024, itself following a slower-than-average 2023. This downturn has been especially trying on below-the-line crew members, like those represented by IATSE.

Figure 3.4 - Decreases in Union Membership by International Union, California, 2023-2024

This table shows the values for California unions which reported decreases in membership from 2023-2024, aggregated by international union. The second column shows the absolute number of reported decrease in members, and the final column shows the percent decrease this represented for the union. The last row is an aggregation of 14 other unions which reported a decrease in membership.

Union	New Members	Rate of Increase
UFCW	-3,533	-2.4%
IAM	-2,358	-3.0%
IATSE	-1,273	-1.9%
USW	-796	-3.4%
NALC	-723	-2.0%
Other unions which reported decreases	-3,135	-1.5%

UFCW = United Food & Commercial Workers. IAM = Machinists. IATSE = Theatrical and Stage Employees. USW = Steelworkers. NALC = Letter Carriers.

Table: UCLA IRLE. - Source: OLMS Online Public Disclosure Room.

Conclusion

Although some unions did experience challenges in 2024, most international unions reported at least modest increases in reported membership, and several reported substantial increases. In all, California unions reported at least 87,000 additional union members joining the ranks of the state's organized labor movement. Indeed, many unions reported drastic increases in membership between 2023 and 2024. SEIU remained the largest union in the state by a long-shot, and in 2024 the union saw its size increase even further. But several smaller unions also reported impressive increases in membership last year. Overall, the OLMS data from 2024 points to a larger labor movement than the previous year in California.

Appendix

Figure 3.5 - California Union Membership Aggregated by International Union, 2024

The table below shows union membership aggregated by international union. The third column of this table shows the reported 2024 membership for all California unions, aggregated by international union. The fourth column shows the absolute reported increase or decrease in membership between 2023 and 2024, and the fifth column shows the percent change in membership.

Abbreviation	Common Name or Description	2024 Membership	Increase or Decrease in Members, 2023 to 2024	Rate of Increase or Decrease
AAE	Educators	70	0	0.0%
AAUP	University Professors	1,913	79	4.3%
AFGE	Federal Government Ees.	30,093	-713	-2.3%
AFM	Musicians	9,162	167	1.9%
AFSCME	State, County, and Municipal Ees.	91,876	5,431	6.3%
AFT	Teachers	81,105	-611	-0.7%
APWU	Postal Workers	33,236	3,005	9.9%
ATU	Amalgamated Transit Union	9,049	-25	-0.3%
BCTGM	Bakers	7,983	-211	-2.6%
BRS	Railroad Signalmen	383	-15	-3.8%
CNA	California Nurses Assn.	133,446	8,416	6.7%
CWA	Communication Workers	40,964	3,016	7.9%
DGA	Directors Guild of America	19,663	17	0.1%
IAFF	Firefighters	37,233	533	1.5%

Abbreviation	Common Name or Description	2024 Membership	Increase or Decrease in Members, 2023 to 2024	Rate of Increase or Decrease
IAHFIAW	Insulators	1,758	-79	-4.3%
IAM	Machinists	75,288	-2,358	-3.0%
IATSE	Intl. Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees	64,311	-1,273	-1.9%
IBB	Boilermakers	5,690	1,100	24.0%
IBEW	Electrical Workers	90,574	745	0.9%
IBT	Teamsters	271,600	2,413	0.9%
IFPTE	Engineers	8,486	-31	-0.4%
ILWU	Longshoremen	17,418	-415	-2.3%
IUBAC	Bricklayers	3,695	166	4.7%
IUEC	Elevator Constructors	1,346	-57	-4.1%
IUOE	Operating Engineers	100,890	15,508	18.2%
IUPAT	Painters	21,321	-65	-0.3%
IW	Ironworkers	18,970	-402	-2.1%
IWW	Wobblies	527	6	1.2%
LIUNA	Laborers	75,484	790	1.1%
NALC	Letter Carriers	34,822	-723	-2.0%
NATCA	Air Traffic Controllers	1,616	54	3.5%
NFOP	Frat. Order of Police	194	0	0.0%
NTEU	Treasury Ees. Union	6,919	608	9.6%
NUHW	Natl. Union of Healthcare Workers	19,119	581	3.1%
OPCMI	Cement Masons	16,801	133	0.8%
OPEIU	Office and Professional Ees.	15,214	776	5.4%
PPPWU	Printers	5,168	-424	-7.6%

Abbreviation	Common Name or Description	2024 Membership	Increase or Decrease in Members, 2023 to 2024	Rate of Increase or Decrease
RLCA	Rural Letter Carriers	3,246	3	0.1%
SEIU	Service Ees. Intl. Union	665,619	36,477	5.8%
SIUNA	Seafarers	2,030	33	1.7%
SMART	Sheetmetal Workers	23,480	8	0.0%
TMT	Tile Setters	71	5	7.6%
TWU	Transportation Workers Union	2,409	-49	-2.0%
UA	Plumbers and Pipefitters	39,398	880	2.3%
UAW	Autoworkers	2,586	232	9.9%
UBC	Carpenters	73,587	614	0.8%
UE	Union of Electrical Workers	1,284	20	1.6%
UFCW	Food and Commercial Workers	141,810	-3,533	-2.4%
UFW	Farmworkers	4,094	83	1.7%
UNITE HERE	Hotel and Restaurant Ees.	56,435	3,550	6.7%
USW	Steelworkers	22,451	-796	-3.4%
UUR	Roofers	3,614	369	11.4%
UWU	Utility Workers	5,424	123	2.3%
WPPW	Wood and Paper Workers	288	-38	-11.7%
Independent Unions	various	29,806	1,215	4.2%
Total	na	2,047,762	75,338	3.2%

Table: UCLA IRLE - Source: OLMS Online Public Disclosure Room

Endnotes

1. OLMS. 2022. Instructions for Form LM-4 Labor Organization Annual Report. Government handbook, Office of Labor-Management Standards, United States Department of Labor. pg.5, section 11. Note that instructions are identical for unions that use the LM-2 or LM-3 reports.
2. For example, should retirees who pay a special retiree rate count as a 'member.'
3. "[AFSCME 3299](#)," AFSCME 3299, Accessed June 30, 2025.
4. UDW. 2022. Form LM-2 Labor Organization Annual Report, Fiscal Year 2022. It is unclear why UDW used to provide LM forms and stopped in 2023.
5. "[Who We Are: Executive Management](#)." Los Angeles Department of Water & Power, accessed June 30 2025.
6. Though primarily a private sector union, the Machinists union includes their affiliate of the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE). NALC represents exclusively federal employees through the US Postal Service.
7. Larson, A. "[Automation In Retail Is Even Worse Than You Thought](#)." The Nation. Jan. 22, 2025.
8. Curwen, T. and A. Campa. "[End Of The Line For Farmer John. A Smelly LA Landmark Of Dodger Dogs, Tourists, Protests](#)." Los Angeles Times. Jun. 11, 2022.
9. Smith, D. "['It Feels Empty': Is Hollywood Film And TV Production In A Death Spiral?](#)" The Guardian. Apr. 26, 2025.

CHAPTER 4

Prominent Strikes and Direct Actions

UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE)

Justin McBride, Chris Zepeda-Millán, and Cristhian Lin

Introduction

Over the past few years, California has been the epicenter of the recent nationwide upsurge in union militancy. Workers in this “Left Coast” state have historically not been afraid to engage in direct actions against their employers, and this trend continued in 2024. Workers in dozens of workplaces struck for better working conditions and higher wages. In addition, other forms of worker actions crisscrossed the Golden State’s streets and plazas throughout the year.

This section uses data from the Labor Action Tracker, a joint dataset compiled by Cornell University’s Institute for Labor Relations and the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign School of Labor and Employment Relations.¹ The project collects data on worker actions nationwide by web scraping media coverage. We took the underlying data on labor actions in the news, filtered for California, and removed any that were not initiated by a union or a worker center.² While the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) does track worker strikes, it does not disaggregate its findings by region. To our knowledge, no other data source provides a comprehensive take on worker action by geographic location.

The Labor Action Tracker is an invaluable tool, but it does suffer from some limitations. First and foremost, the tool only captures actions that received press attention. Workers engage in direct actions every day, but many go unnoticed by the media or the broader public. Examples might include joining with co-workers to complain about a bad manager, refusing to undertake a dangerous work assignment, or wearing pro-union shirts in a public-facing job. The actions discussed in this section are substantially larger. The news scraping method likely favors strikes over protests, as work stoppages may be more heavily covered in the media than routine protests. In addition to favoring large or showy actions, the bias might also favor unions that have more robust public relations teams.

As such, the findings presented below should not be viewed as a comprehensive list of all worker activity in the State of California in 2024, but rather as a roadmap of the largest and most visible such activities during the calendar year.

California labor organizations held labor actions almost every other day in 2024

Figure 4.1 - Strikes and Protests, California, 2021-2024

The table below shows the number of strikes and protests reported by the Labor Action Tracker for the last four years. The top bar shows the number of strikes, and the lower bar the number of protests.

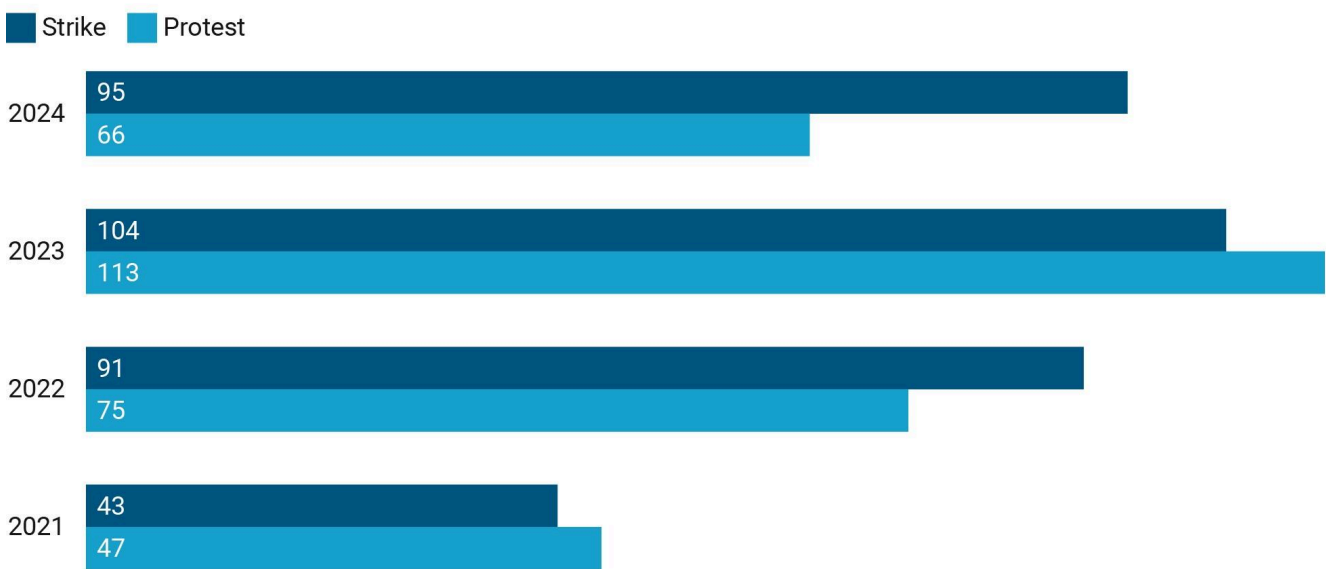


Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: Kallas, J., Iyer, D. K., & Friedman, E. (2024). "Labor Action Tracker." Cornell University ILR School & University of Illinois LER School.

In 2024, the California labor movement engaged in numerous strikes and protest actions. On average, unions and worker centers launched just under two work stoppages per week throughout the course of the year and five additional protest actions per month. The yearly tally is almost exactly equivalent to 2022, the first post-pandemic year when most workers were fully back and on the job. Unfortunately, the strike tracker data does not cover the pre-pandemic era, so it is impossible to say with certainty if 2024’s levels were a return to normal or still exhibiting signs of recovery.

Nonetheless, 2024 did demonstrate a drop from the prior year. Nationwide, 2023 was characterized by large quantities of worker actions, particularly in the summer of that year, which activists dubbed ‘Hot Labor Summer.’³ In all, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), 2023 had over 16.7 million days of idleness from work stoppages (the technical term used by BLS to refer to lost days of worker productivity because of strikes). This was by far the highest annual number of days of idleness nationwide in well over a decade. Indeed, 2023 had more

days of work idleness than the prior eight years combined. 2024, by contrast, had 3.4 million days of idleness—less than any of the individual months of August, September, or October of 2023. Despite the large drop-off from 2023, 2024 still exhibited the second highest number of days of idleness in a decade—far from a slow year.⁴

Not all California labor organizations engaged in highly visible protest activity in 2024

In 2024, 27 labor organizations engaged in actions in California that were captured by the Labor Action Tracker (for unions, this figure aggregates local unions by international). Six of these organizations were non-union worker movements, a mix of worker centers and professional associations. On the union side, 21 of California's 57 international unions (36.8%) took their fights with employers to the streets, either in a strike or some other kind of protest, at least to the extent that their action was picked up by the press.

SEIU alone accounted for 41% of these labor protests and strikes in 2024. Of the 66 total actions undertaken by SEIU, the majority (42) were from SEIU's fast food campaign, most of these being short one-to-three-day strikes (see the fast food campaign section of this report for more details on this organizing effort).

SEIU's strikes also included the largest strike of the year in terms of membership. The California Faculty Association (CFA), an affiliate of SEIU which represents both senate faculty and lecturers in the California State University (CSU) system, held a strike in January that covered approximately 29,000 instructors across the system's 23 campuses,⁵ possibly the largest faculty strike in the history of the nation. The strike, which started as an indefinite labor stoppage, settled within a single day, with CFA reporting substantial wage increases and increased leave for its members.⁶

UNITE HERE appears second on this list. Los Angeles-based Local 11 launched the largest hotel worker strike in the nation's history in 2023. Other UNITE HERE locals across the country followed with a widespread contract campaign in 2024 that included several other major California metro areas. The hospitality workers union's strike wave included only eight actions captured by the Labor Action Tracker at California hotels, half in the LA metro area at the tail end of the LA strike, and half in other urban centers of the state. The Labor Action Tracker data certainly underreports the scale of UNITE HERE's overall campaign, as the LA union alone struck over 60 hotels between July 1, 2023 and the end of 2024, some of them several times.⁷ UNITE HERE's 2024 contract campaign strikes ultimately yielded substantial wage increases and additional work benefits.⁸ In 2024, Local 11 also held a major strike at LAX that covered over 400 workers.

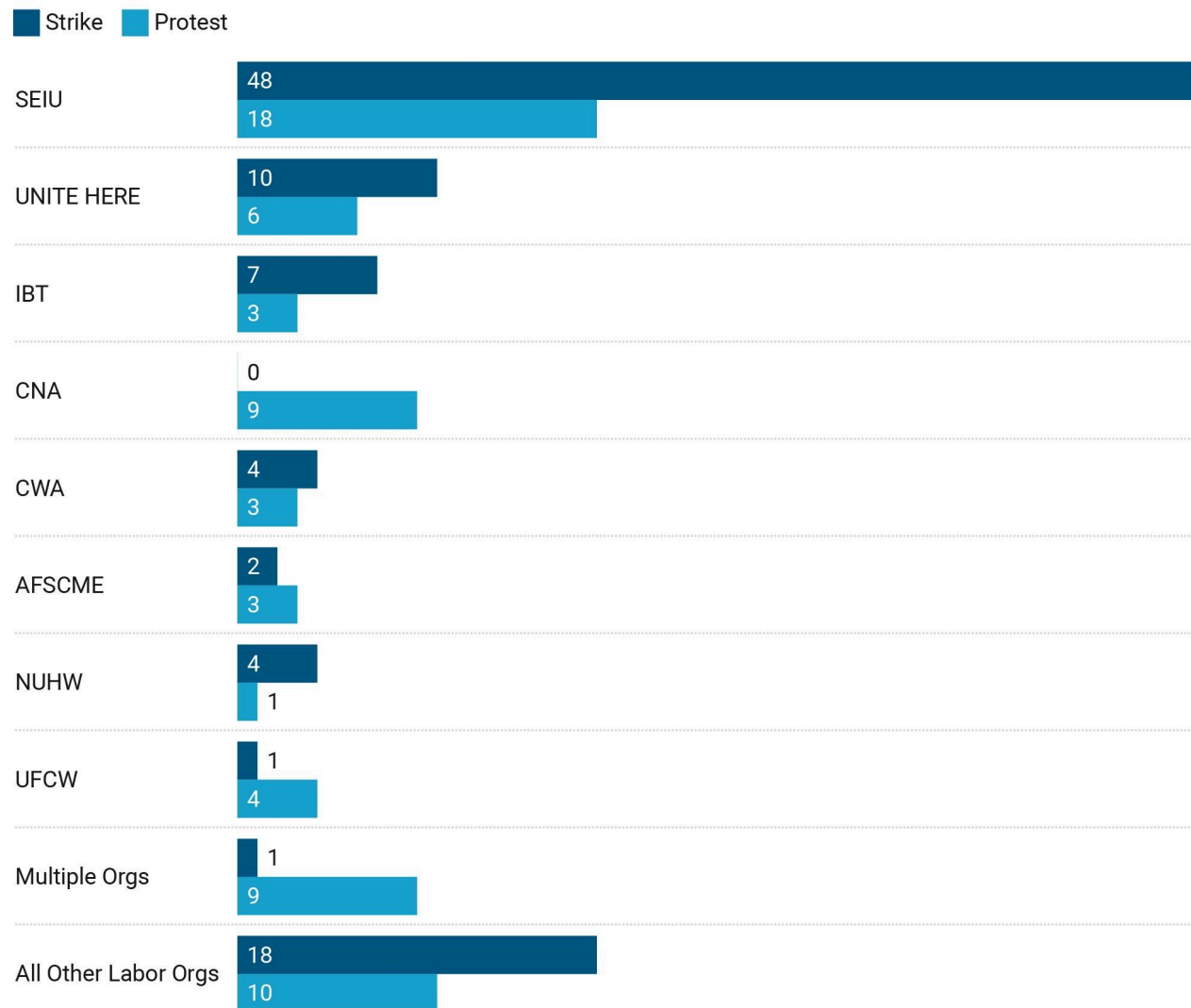
The Teamsters union is third on the list. Their actions include a series of protests against Amazon. In 2024, the formerly independent New York-based Amazon Labor Union (ALU)

affiliated with the Teamsters,⁹ bolstering the union's efforts against the massive company. ALU had been the first unionization attempt to win a certification election. While the Teamsters had been engaged with Amazon workers in California before the affiliation, the joint powers of these two organizations accelerated the public nature of the fight (see the section of this report on Amazon organizing in the Inland Empire for further details on these actions).

It is important to note that California unions occasionally teamed up to engage in collective actions in 2024. Most of these joint actions were concentrated in healthcare or in the public sector, including several actions by public sector workers directed at the City and County of San Francisco. The single joint-union strike occurred when the Longshoremen and the Machinists came together for a 25-day stoppage against Georgia-Pacific at a wallboard plant in Antioch.¹⁰

Figure 4.2 - Strikes and Protests by International Union, California, 2024

The figure below shows the number of 2024 strikes and protests in California, sorted by international union captured by the Labor Action Tracker. The upper bar shows strikes, and the lower bar protests.



IBT = International Brotherhood of Teamsters. CNA = California Nurses Association. CWA = Communication Workers of America. AFSCME = American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees. NUHW = National Union of Healthcare Workers. UFCW = United Food and Commercial Workers.

Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: Kallas, J., Iyer, D. K., & Friedman, E. (2024). "Labor Action Tracker." Cornell University ILR School & University of Illinois LER School.

Labor action was highly concentrated in a few select industries

Worker action was highly concentrated in a few key industries. Two sectors accounted for well over half of all documented labor actions in the state, and 76.5% of documented actions occurred in just four sectors.

Accommodation and Food Services made up 38.3% of all actions in the state. This is a combination of primarily two major campaigns—the UNITE HERE hotel strike of 2024, and the SEIU-led fast food worker campaign, both discussed above. Each of these campaigns relied on mass mobilization, frequent strikes, direct action, and worker militancy to further their goals.

Unsurprisingly, health care was the second largest industry on the list—about one in five actions statewide were undertaken by health care workers. SEIU, the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), and the California Nurses Association (CNA) were all highly active unions throughout the year. Several joint-union actions also occurred in this sector.

Transportation and Warehousing and Educational Services were the other two active industries for organizing. The former is largely the domain of the Teamsters union, which engaged in actions against Amazon but also other large logistics firms during the year. Educational services actions included K-12 teachers in a variety of school districts throughout the state, as well as a major strike against the CSU system by an SEIU affiliate in January of 2024 (discussed in greater detail above).

Conclusion

All in all, Golden State workers had a busy year of strikes and protests in 2024, though these actions were largely concentrated in four industries and among a handful of unions. The data in this section is just the tip of the iceberg for worker militancy throughout the state. While the number of strikes and labor protests did decrease from the unusually active year of 2023, California workers still on average initiated several new strikes and engaged in protests every week of the year, often resulting in big wins.

Figure 4.3 - Strikes and Protests By Industry, California, 2024

This figure shows the number of strikes and protest actions reported by the Labor Action Tracker sorted by industry. The upper bar shows the number of strikes, and the lower bar the number of protests.

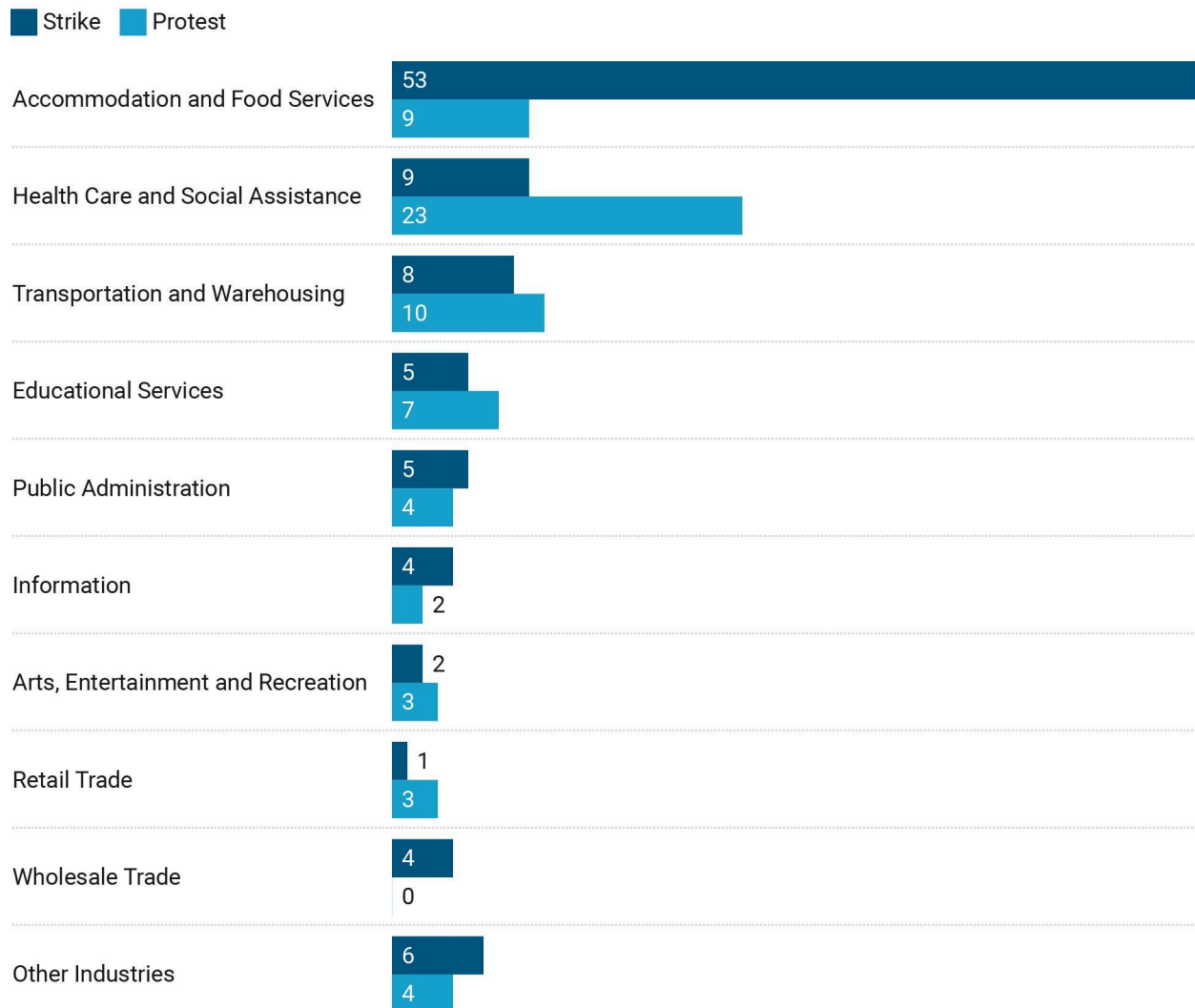


Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: Kallas, J., Iyer, D. K., & Friedman, E. (2024). "Labor Action Tracker." Cornell University ILR School & University of Illinois LER School.

Endnotes

1. Kallas, J., Iyer, D. K., & Friedman, E. 2024. "Labor Action Tracker." Cornell University ILR School & University of Illinois LER School.
2. For example, student-led actions or actions led by tenants' rights organizations.
3. Li, H. "Hot Labor Summer, By The Numbers." Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, CA). Sep. 1, 2023.
4. In 2023, the total days of idleness were 16,673,000. The sum of the prior eight years had been 13,494,000. US Bureau of Labor Statistics Series WSU001: Days of idleness (in 1,000s) from all work stoppages in effect in the period.
5. Karlamangla, S. "Cal State Faculty Begin Largest US Strike of University Professors." The New York Times (New York, NY). Jan. 22, 2024.
6. CFA. 2024. Tentative Agreement Reached Ending CFA Members' Historic Systemwide Strike. Union press release, January 22, 2024. Retrieved 6/20/2025.
7. Hussain, S. "With strike behind them, Los Angeles hotels look to move on." Los Angeles Times (Los Angeles, CA). Aug. 22, 2024.
8. Hussain, S. 2024. Op. cit. Hoge, P. "Monthslong SF Hotel Strike Ends As Hilton Workers Ratify Agreement." San Francisco Examiner (San Francisco, CA). Dec. 24, 2024.
9. Chapman, M. and H. Hadero. Amazon Labor Union Membership Vote Overwhelmingly In Favor of an Affiliation With the Teamsters. AP News. Jun. 18, 2024.
10. Sivanandam, H. Antioch: Georgia-Pacific union workers on strike for second day over pay negotiations. The Mercury News (San Jose, CA). Sep. 17, 2024.

CHAPTER 5

A Seat at the Table: Sectoral Standards and Worker Organizing in Fast Food

UC Berkeley Labor Center
Savannah Hunter



Fast-food workers assemble outside the first Fast Food Council meeting on March 15, 2024, in Oakland, CA. / Photo courtesy of the California Fast Food Workers Union

In 2024, California’s fast-food workers achieved significant organizing victories, which paved the way for increased wages and established pathways for greater worker voice over working conditions. With sustained worker organizing alongside partnership with the state legislature, fast-food workers helped achieve passage of AB 1228. This bill established a \$20 minimum wage at fast-food restaurants with at least 60 establishments nationwide, and gave workers a seat at the table on a newly established Fast Food Council.¹ The Fast Food Council is housed within the California Department of Industrial Relations and is tasked with developing industry-wide labor standards.

Challenges to traditional union organizing in fast food

Fast-food worker organizing has roots in the Fight for \$15 movement, which began more than a decade ago. Fight for \$15 successfully raised state minimum wages across much of the United States, with California being the first state to reach \$15 in 2022. The movement lifted earnings for fast-food workers as well as others earning at or near the minimum.² But the movement’s ambition was a \$15 minimum wage and a union, and this second goal was challenging to achieve at scale in fast food due to the fissured nature of the industry—principally, its reliance on a franchise model.

Under a traditional organizing approach, fast-food workers must organize each establishment individually to achieve collective bargaining rights. With more than 33,000 so-called “limited-service restaurants” and over half a million fast-food workers in California alone,³ expanding worker voice through single-shop unionization is challenging. While workers must organize franchise by franchise, working conditions in individual restaurants are shaped in no small measure by the overall structure of the fast-food industry. Franchisors (brands) hold power over individual franchises’ bottom lines, and diminish profit margins through fee and royalty payments. This dynamic incentivizes franchisees to keep wages low, and leads to conditions ripe for violations such as wage theft.⁴ At the same time, however, under current law franchisors are not legally responsible for working conditions in individual franchises.

Sectoral labor standards as a tool to improve working conditions

In the face of these structural and legal obstacles, establishing sector-specific labor standards policies could be an effective strategy for increasing worker voice and improving fast-food working conditions. Sectoral labor standards take multiple forms, but all mandate labor standards that apply to workers industry-wide. Some provide a formal institutionalized role for workers—at the table alongside employers and government officials—in setting standards.⁵ In these “tripartite” labor standards boards, also called wage boards, the interests of workers, business, and the general public are represented.⁶ The Fast Food Council established by AB 1228 utilizes a tripartite model.

Sectoral strategies can be particularly effective for improving labor standards in low-wage and fissured industries.⁷ First, labor standards boards can help mitigate the power imbalance between workers and employers by ensuring workers have a formal role in setting labor standards. California's 11-member Fast Food Council includes industry representatives and franchise owners, workers and their advocates, and government representatives.

Second, as mentioned, any standards developed by sectoral boards will apply across an entire industry. This would address some of the challenges workers face, improving working conditions in each individual establishment, one by one. The Council is charged with creating standards for wages, working conditions, and training in the industry. This includes the mandate to consider future cost-of-living adjustments to the initial \$20 minimum wage established through AB 1228.

Third, labor standards boards can institutionalize, legitimize, and normalize worker participation in setting labor standards. The Council can empower worker voice through representation on the Council, and serve as a platform for workers to speak up about issues in the industry at public meetings. Fast-food workers have already made multiple recommendations to the Fast Food Council, including strategies for improving job stability; protecting workers' benefits (e.g., sick leave); investigating industry issues with wage theft, health and safety violations, and discrimination and harassment;⁸ and increasing the minimum wage by yearly cost-of-living adjustments to keep up with inflation (like the statewide minimum wage).⁹

Fast-food workers continue to organize across the state

Despite the significant accomplishment of establishing a tripartite labor standards board for California's fast-food industry, the task of improving working conditions and building worker power in the industry is far from over. The Council took effect in 2024 and has held seven public meetings to date.¹⁰ But the Council has yet to address industry standards, particularly improvements in pay. They have until 2029 when the Council sunsets, unless renewed. Research shows that improving job quality through sectoral labor standards strategies is most effective when combined with traditional worker organizing.¹¹ Fast-food workers will need to keep organizing to push for change through the Council as well as build worker power throughout the industry.

To continue supporting organizing efforts, fast-food workers formed a minority union through SEIU in 2024. The California Fast Food Workers Union is a voluntary organization of fast-food workers who choose to join, pay dues, and aid one another in organizing. Having a worker organization can support fast-food worker participation at Fast Food Council meetings, organizing within individual franchises, and engagement in local policy efforts. As a minority union, the California Fast Food Workers Union does not have the legal rights granted to recognized unions, such as the authority to negotiate collective bargaining agreements with individual employers. Even so, its impact is being felt in California. In 2024, fast-food workers organized at least 40 strikes or labor actions.¹² Through their union, workers are mobilizing in

Los Angeles and Santa Clara to adopt Know Your Rights trainings for the industry.¹³ And in Los Angeles, they are pushing to increase work scheduling protections such as the ability to request schedule preferences, receive advanced schedule notice, and priority to claim available hours.¹⁴

Conclusion

Fissuring in the fast-food industry makes it difficult to improve job quality. However, as described in this chapter, California fast-food workers are finding innovative ways to build power and demand dignity on the job.

Endnotes

1. California State Legislature. AB-1228 Fast Food Restaurant Industry: Fast Food Council: Health, Safety, Employment, and Minimum Wage, AB-1228. 2023-2024 session. Introduced in the Assembly on 2/16/23.
2. Wiltshire, J., C. McPherson, M. Reich, and D. Sosinskiy. "Minimum Wage Effects and Monopsony Explanations." *Journal of Labor Economics*, ahead of print (2025).
3. Author's analysis of the Bureau of Labor Statistics Quarterly Census of Employment and Wages (2024) for Limited-service restaurants (NAICS 722513).
4. Ji, M., & D. Weil. "The Impact of Franchising on Labor Standards Compliance." *ILR Review*, 68 no. 5 (2015): 977–1006.
5. Jacobs, K., R. Smith, R., & J. McBride. "State and Local Policies and Sectoral Labor Standards: From Individual Rights to Collective Power." *ILR Review*, 74 no. 5 (2021): 1132–1154.
6. Andrias, K. "Social Bargaining in States and Cities: Toward a More Egalitarian and Democratic Workplace Law." *Harvard Law and Policy Review Online Labor Law Reform Symposium* (2017).
7. Andrias, K. "Social Bargaining in States and Cities: Toward a More Egalitarian and Democratic Workplace Law." *Harvard Law and Policy Review Online Labor Law Reform Symposium* (2017). | Jacobs, K., R. Smith, R., & J. McBride. "State and Local Policies and Sectoral Labor Standards: From Individual Rights to Collective Power." *ILR Review*, 74 no. 5 (2021): 1132–1154.
8. Galvin, D., and J. Barnes. "Wage Theft in the Fast Food Industry: Minimum Wage Violations in Los Angeles." Workplace Justice Lab, Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations & Northwestern University (2025). | Huang, K., K. Jacobs, T. Koonse, I.E. Perry, L. Stock, & S. Waheed. The Fast-Food Industry and COVID-19 in Los Angeles. UCLA Labor Center, UCLA LOSH, UC Berkeley Labor Center, UC Berkeley LOHP. (2021). | "Skimmed & Scammed: Wage Theft from California's Fast Food Workers." SEIU & Fight for \$15. May (2022). | "¡Aguántate! Heat Hazards and Indifference to Safety in California's Fast Food Restaurants." September (2023).
9. California Fast Food Workers Union. "Letter from Fast Food Workers Union to California Fast Food Council," June 24 (2024).
10. "Fast Food Council - Meetings," State of California Department of Industrial Relations. Accessed Jul. 22, 2025.
11. Jacobs, K., R. Smith, R., & J. McBride. "State and Local Policies and Sectoral Labor Standards: From Individual Rights to Collective Power." *ILR Review*, 74 no. 5 (2021): 1132–1154.
12. See Chapter 4 for data on strikes and labor actions.
13. Pho, B. "Silicon Valley Fast-Food Owners Could Pay for Workers' Rights Training." *San José Spotlight* (San Jose, CA). Apr. 9, 2025. | Rainey, L. "Fast Food Worker Rights: City Council Considers How to Expand Protections." *LAist* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 2, 2025.
14. Rainey, L. "Fast Food Worker Rights: City Council Considers How to Expand Protections." *LAist* (Los Angeles, CA), Apr. 2, 2025.

CHAPTER 6

Inland Empire Warehouse Workers' Organizing and Policy Victories in 2024

UC Riverside Inland Empire Labor and Community Center (IELCC)

Jesús “Chuy” Flores, David Mickey-Pabello, and Ellen Reese. *Acknowledgments.*¹



Workers and supporters strike outside the Amazon KSBD Air Hub in San Bernardino, CA, on December 21, 2024 / Photo courtesy of Teamsters Local 1932

Inland Empire warehouse workers: on the rise and making history

Warehouse workers make up a large segment of the workforce in the Inland Empire (IE), but many are low-paid, face dangerous working conditions, and are not yet unionized. However, workers made historic gains through organizing and policy advocacy in 2024. Their campaigns confronted Amazon and other warehouse employers in one of the nation's largest warehouse hubs, winning higher wages and improving health and safety standards concerning heat. The workers' victories are inspiring examples for related national and global campaigns.²

Approximately 1.7 million workers are employed within the IE, and at least 109,000 of them are employed in the five most common non-supervisory warehouse occupations (listed in Figure 6.1). This means that nearly one in fifteen workers employed in the IE works as a warehouse worker.³

Most warehouse workers in the IE struggle to make ends meet. As Figure 1 shows, the average non-supervisory warehouse worker is paid low wages, roughly seventy-five percent of what the average worker in the Inland Empire earns (\$44,776 and \$61,930, respectively). On average, warehouse workers are paid roughly half of their managers' earnings (\$44,776 and \$110,840, respectively).

Most IE warehouse workers are workers of color. Latino and Black workers are disproportionately employed within the five most common non-supervisory warehouse occupations combined. Notably, Latinos represent 42.0% of the IE's workforce, but 61.8% of warehouse workers (see Figure 6.2).

Figure 6.1 - Mean Wage and Occupation Growth (last 10 years) by Select Warehouse Worker Occupations in the Inland Empire

This graph shows the mean wage (number left of the bar) and how much each occupation has grown over the last ten years (number in the bar). For example, stockers and order fillers were paid a mean of \$44,710 in 2023, and the number of workers increased by 27.44% from 2014 to 2023.

Laborers and freight, stock, and material movers, hand

\$44,460 72.8%

Stockers and order fillers

\$44,710 27.4%

Packers and packagers, hand

\$42,840 125.8%

Shipping, receiving, and inventory clerks

\$43,180 26.1%

Industrial truck and tractor operators

\$49,150 32.8%

Transportation, storage, and distribution managers

\$100,840 76.4%

All warehouse workers (excluding managers)

\$44,776 54.9%

All IE Workers

\$61,930 27.5%

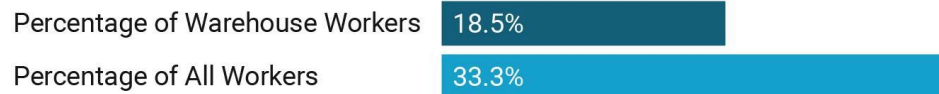
Note: Census occupational codes used: 9620, 9645, 9640, 5610, 1060, and 9600.

Chart: UC Riverside IELCC - Source: 2023 & 2014 ACS 5-Year Sample IPUMS Microdata (Number of Workers and Percentage Growth- Author's Calculations). May 2023 Bureau of Labor Statistics OEWS (Mean Wages)

Figure 6.2 - Racial and Ethnic Composition Differences Between Occupations in the Inland Empire

The bars below represent the share of each racial or ethnic group for both warehouse workers and all workers in the Inland Empire. For example, 61.78% of warehouse workers in the Inland Empire are Latino.

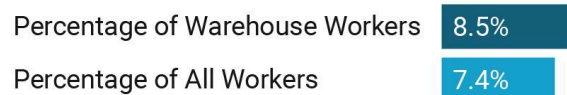
White



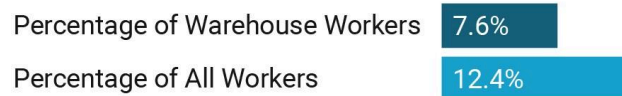
Latino



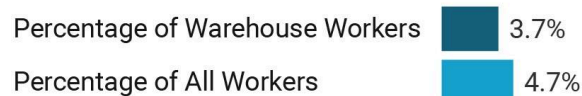
Black



Asian



Other



The ethnic and racial categories are defined as follows: Latino is any Latino, and the White, Black, and Asian are all non-Latino. Other includes individuals who identified as Native American Alaska Native, Other, or Multiracial.

Chart: UC Riverside IELCC - Source: 2023 ACS 5-Year Sample IPUMS Microdata

Improving heat safety through advocacy

Workers affiliated with the Warehouse Workers Resource Center (WWRC) and their allies engaged in a successful campaign to improve workplace heat safety in 2024. In January, the California Division of Occupational Safety and Health (Cal/OSHA) ruled in favor of Amazon warehouse workers at the KSBD air hub—the company’s largest air cargo facility on the West Coast, located at the San Bernardino International Airport and employing over 1,000 workers.⁴ The complaint was filed in coordination with a worker organizing campaign within KSBD that was then underway (described more fully below). CalOSHA responded to workers’ concerns and found that Amazon failed to implement heat illness prevention measures for outdoor workers, including providing access to sufficient shade and water during periods of high heat.⁵ Amazon was fined over \$14,000 by the state and instructed to take corrective actions at the facility.⁶

Another major victory celebrated by WWRC and the labor movement in 2024 was the adoption of the state’s new heat safety standards for indoor workers by California’s Occupational Safety and Health Standards Board in June. The new rules, which require employers to provide cooling areas for workers when temperatures reach 82 degrees Fahrenheit and additional protective measures at 87 degrees, were implemented the following month. These standards had been under development since the passage of California’s new indoor heat protection law for workers in 2016, the first of its kind in the nation, but were delayed for years due to employer concerns about the costs of installing cool-down areas.⁷ WWRC and their allies successfully advocated for the passage of the law in 2016, which required the state to develop the new heat safety standards. Afterward, they worked tirelessly to shape the specific heat standard rules and spur their implementation. Although WWRC and other advocates hope to further strengthen these new heat safety standards, the new rules provide important new safeguards to indoor workers amid rising temperatures and climate change.⁸

Amazon Teamsters’ historic strike

In November 2024, Amazon warehouse workers at the KSBD air hub in San Bernardino launched a union card drive to authorize the Teamsters to represent them in collective bargaining.⁹ By December, a majority of these workers had signed union authorization cards.¹⁰ This unionization effort was the culmination of years of organizing by Amazon KSBD workers, initially as members of the Inland Empire Amazon Warehouse Union (IE-AWU). Supported by the Teamsters, WWRC, and other allies, workers engaged in collective action including walkouts. They won increased wages, safer working conditions, and other workplace improvements.¹¹

Amazon refused to recognize Amazon Teamsters’ new unions at KSBD and other Amazon facilities in the U.S., and failed to file for a union election through the National Labor Relations Board, prompting a national holiday strike.¹² The week before Christmas, members of Amazon Teamsters at KSBD, along with Amazon warehouse workers and delivery drivers at eight other

facilities across the U.S., went on strike. Workers demanded union recognition and improved working conditions. Joined by Amazon workers and their supporters who picketed outside of hundreds of U.S. facilities, this historic strike gained national media attention, delayed holiday deliveries, and increased pressure on Amazon's CEO to respond.¹³ Tobias Cheng, KSBD worker, said: "I have proudly participated in strikes at Amazon because, as workers, withholding our labor is one of our strongest tools in the fight to get massive corporations like Amazon to listen and negotiate with us. Amazon, like so many companies in the Inland Empire, exploits our community for profit, and in a union, we can leverage our worker power to make real change in our workplaces."¹⁴ While Amazon continues to dispute the unionization process in San Bernardino and other locations, the Amazon Teamsters are hopeful that the National Labor Relations Board will rule in their favor and order the company to the negotiating table in 2025.

Conclusion

The warehousing and logistics industry plays a central role in the Inland Empire's economy, but continues to leave its workers behind. In 2024, workers came together and made significant progress in improving working conditions through collective action and policy advocacy. New policy fights and targeted enforcement strategies can further strengthen workers' labor rights. Continued organizing is necessary to support warehouse workers' ongoing efforts to gain union recognition, good contracts, and workplace safety.

Endnotes

1. We thank Mario Vasquez (Teamsters 1932) and Tobias Cheng (Amazon Teamsters) for their assistance with providing the photo and a quote for this report. We are also very grateful to the workers and staff affiliated with Amazon Teamsters, Teamsters 1932, and Warehouse Worker Resource Center, whose work inspired this report. A special thanks to the editors and the directors and staff at the Inland Empire Labor and Community Center at UCR for their assistance and support for this project. The James Irvine Foundation and the UC Worker Rights Policy Initiative provided financial assistance for this research.
2. Emmons Allison, Juliann and Ellen Reese, *Unsustainable: Amazon, Warehousing, and the Politics of Exploitation*, (University of California Press, 2023).
3. Authors' calculations, using May 2023 Occupational Employment and Wage Statistics (OEWS) for the total number of workers employed within the IE and the 2023 5-year IPUMS Microdata sample of the American Community Survey (ACS) data for the total number of workers employed in the 5 most common warehouse occupations within the IE).
4. Horseman, Jeff. "What's it like inside Amazon's San Bernardino Air Hub?" San Bernardino Sun, August 19, 2024.
<https://www.sbsun.com/2024/08/16/whats-it-like-inside-amazons-san-bernardino-air-hub/>. (accessed July 16, 2025).
5. State of California Department of Industrial Relations, Division of Occupational Safety and Health, San Bernardino District Office, "Citation and Notification of Penalty. To Amazon Services LLC, DBA Amazon Air Freight Fulfillment Center and its Successors," January 19, 2024,
<https://warehouseworkers.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/KSBD-CalOSHA-Heat-Citations-01-31-24.pdf> (accessed July 3, 2025). Warehouse Worker Resource Center, "Heat Kills: Working in High Temperatures is Dangerous," 2024,
<https://warehouseworkers.org/heat/> (accessed July 3, 2025). Warehouse Worker Resource Center, "Facing Extreme Heat, Cal/OSHA Inspects Amazon Warehouse in San Bernardino," Press Release, July 28, 2023,
<https://warehouseworkers.org/facing-extreme-heat-cal-osha-inspects-amazon-warehouse-in-san-bernardino/> (accessed July 3, 2025).
6. Ibid.
7. Kuang, Jean. "What California's long-delayed indoor heat rule means for workers." Calmatters, July 24, 2024.
<https://calmatters.org/california-divide/2024/06/extreme-heat-california-workplace-rules/> (accessed July 18, 2025).
8. Emmons Allison and Reese, *Unsustainable*; Warehouse Worker Resource Center, "Heat Kills."

9. Moore, Alex, "Press Release: Amazon Workers at San Bernardino Air Hub Launch Organizing Drive with Teamsters," International Brotherhood of Teamsters, November 19, 2024, <https://teamster.org/2024/11/amazon-workers-at-san-bernardino-air-hub-launch-organizing-drive-with-teamsters/#:~:text=Workers%20Kick%20Off%20Card%2DSigning%20Blitz%20to%20Join.to%20join%20the%201.3%20million%2Dmember%20Teamsters%20Union> (accessed July 3, 2025).
10. Kingston, John, "Teamsters Have Some Legal Issues to Overcome After Wins at Amazon and DSPS," [Freightwaves.com](https://www.freightwaves.com), December 18, 2024, <https://www.freightwaves.com/news/teamsters-have-some-legal-issues-to-overcome-after-wins-at-amazon-and-with-dsps> (accessed July 3, 2025).
11. Emmons Allison and Reese, Unsustainable; Reese, Ellen and Jake Alimahomed-Wilson, "Teamsters Confront Amazon: An Early Assessment," New Labor Forum, 31, no. 3 (2022), 43-51. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10957960221116835>.
12. Kingston, "Teamsters Have Some Legal Issues to Overcome After Wins at Amazon and DSPS."
13. International Brotherhood of Teamsters, "Teamsters at KSBD Air Hub Join Largest Ever U.S. Strike Against Amazon," PR Newswire, December 21, 2024, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/teamsters-at-ksbd-air-hub-join-largest-ever-us-strike-against-amazon-302337885.html> (accessed July 3, 2025).
14. Personal correspondence with the authors, Mario Vasquez (Teamsters Local 1932), and Tobias Cheng (Amazon Teamsters), July 3, 2025.

CHAPTER 7

Farmworker Organizing in California: Growing the UFW Legacy

UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE)

Justin McBride



Activists from across the state support the UFW as they conduct outreach to workers about DALE in Bakersfield, CA. / Photo courtesy of Alejandra Quintero

Last year was a key year for farmworker organizing in California. The United Farmworkers of America (UFW) leveraged new laws and other government programs to expand its reach across California's agricultural regions. A new California law allowed the UFW to organize workers more quickly, and led to the largest spate of agricultural worker organizing in over a decade. The UFW was also able to help eligible immigrant workers apply for deferred action status via a Biden-era program for victims of labor law violations. Key agricultural firms began a pushback against the new organizing pathways used by the union, and changing political winds around immigration policy may pose challenges for future campaigns like those the union undertook in 2024.

New organizing

In late 2022, Governor Newsom signed AB 2183, which substantially changed the procedures used by the Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB) to certify union certification petitions. Prior to the bill's signing, the ALRB certified workers via a process not unlike the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) election pathway used by workers in other private sector organizing drives. AB 2183 changed things substantially by allowing the ALRB to certify a union as the exclusive bargaining agent for a group of workers upon demonstration of majority sign-up,¹ a process very similar to the card-check process often pursued by some private sector unions and the majority sign-up process used under California's public sector labor relations law.

The UFW successfully organized under the new law in 2024, filing four RC petitions throughout the state.² While the number may seem modest, in the prior decade no single year saw more than two petitions filed by any unions, and most certification attempts were confined to the cannabis sector. Prior to the law going into effect, the UFW had not filed an RC petition since 2017, and indeed had only filed three RC petitions in the entire decade leading up to 2024.³ In its four 2024 petitions, the UFW sought to represent just under 1,200 new members—a potentially huge increase for a union that reported about 4,800 members at the start of 2024.⁴

The largest of these units filed was at Vieira Agricultural Enterprises, located in Atwater, a small city north of Merced. Vieira grows sweet potatoes under the A.V. Thomas brand name, and claims to process upwards of 100 truckloads of sweet potatoes on any given day.⁵ The UFW estimates that the unit contains roughly 700 new members. Other key petitions were filed at Olive Hill, a greenhouse in Fallbrook (San Diego County), and Ho Sai Gai Farms, a vegetable farm in Bakersfield (Kern County).

The Wonderful campaign

On February 23, 2024, a UFW organizer entered the Wonderful Company headquarters facility in Wasco (Kern County) and served a receptionist with a copy of the union's latest RC petition to represent 350 Wonderful employees at two facilities, in Shafter and McFarland (both in Kern County). This petition would spark a multi-year, multi-suit legal challenge by growers to California's entire agricultural labor relations framework.

The Wonderful Company is owned by Stewart and Lynda Resnick, a wealthy multi-billionaire California power couple who own a large share of the land and water rights markets for much of the San Joaquin (Central) Valley.⁶ Wonderful operates and produces several household brand-name agricultural products, including Halo mandarin oranges, POM pomegranate products, Fiji water, and Wonderful almonds.

Wonderful immediately sought to stop recognition of the UFW as the workers' representative by filing several lawsuits, one in Kern County Superior Court and one in federal court. Wonderful argued, among other things, that the new streamlined ALRB election process violated the company's right to access information and the firm's right to due process. Wonderful lawyers complained to the courts that the new ALRB election process "fundamentally alters the business and economic relationships between agricultural employers and farm workers, and interferes with protected liberty and property interests." Further, the lawyers claimed that the firm faced irreparable harm to its reputation and finances were the union to be certified.⁷

While the Superior Court of Kern County was initially sympathetic to Wonderful's position, both the state and federal lawsuits are in the appeals process at the time of writing. The future of the cases, and thus the ultimate constitutionality of the ALRB's new election processes, is unclear.

Protecting immigrant rights

In September of 2023, Rosa Sanchez clocked in for her job at Grimmway Farms in Kern County, a carrot grower with operations throughout the state. Sanchez worked for Esparza Enterprises, a farm labor contractor (FLC) that had been hired by Grimmway. At 11:45 am, tragedy struck. Sanchez was killed by a truck driven by an employee of another FLC, M&M Labor Inc.⁸ Other workers reported that the company covered her body with a blanket and forced them to continue laboring around her corpse in a horrifying display of disregard for human life.⁹ Investigation by California OSHA (CalOSHA) later found that Esparza, M&M, and Grimmway had all failed to have adequate workplace injury prevention plans in place, and assessed tens of thousands of dollars in fines to each of the three firms.

In addition to the citations, CalOSHA applied for certification under the Deferred Action for Labor Enforcement (DALE) program. Announced by the Biden-era Department of Homeland Security (DHS) in January of 2023, DALE allows some workers who experienced workplace violations to seek deferred action from deportation, and work authorization, for a period of two to four years when an enforcement agency seeks approval from DHS.¹⁰ In this case, DHS certified all three firms (Grimmway, Esparza, and M&M) for DALE status in the aftermath of the CalOSHA investigation.

Following this development, the UFW sprang into action. The union organized a series of DALE clinics in Bakersfield in partnership with the National Immigration Law Center (NILC) and several other organizations. With the assistance of NILC attorneys and dozens of volunteers, hundreds of former and current workers from the three companies successfully completed the DALE application process at each of the clinics, ultimately gaining work permits from DHS.

In 2024, arguably no union in the country was more successful than the UFW in identifying workers who qualified for the Deferred Action for Labor Enforcement (DALE) program. Under the union's leadership, hundreds of California farmworkers were able to apply for, and receive, deferred action immigration status, securing multi-year work permits that would counteract the chilling effect of potential retaliation on workplace investigations.

The UFW was able to use the DALE program for the purpose for which it was intended—to give workers the confidence to be able to speak out about labor violations in their workplaces, including life-threatening hazards faced by workers like Rosa Sanchez. With the 2025 administration change, however, the likelihood of continuing to engage this program seems severely limited for the time being.

Conclusion

In 2024, the UFW union engaged in its most active series of organizing drives in well over a decade, filing petitions to potentially grow the union by over 25% in this year alone. The union also mobilized to assist hundreds of workers in attaining deferred action under the DALE program. However, employers are fighting back, and the new administration's approach to immigration policy changed substantially in 2025, leaving much of California's agricultural workers with an uncertain future.

Endnotes

1. California State Legislature, Agricultural Labor Relations: Elections, AB-2183. 2021-2022 session. Introduced in Assembly on 2/15/2022. Agricultural workers are exempted under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA); labor relations for agricultural workers in California are governed by a state agency.
2. The union filed a fifth petition at the end of 2023. Like under the NLRA, RC petitions overseen by the ALRB are union-filed petitions seeking authorization.
3. Analysis of ALRB annual reports. Accessed 7/15/2025.
4. UFW. 2023. Form LM-2 Labor Organization Annual Report, Fiscal Year 2023.
5. "Nowhere is AV Thomas Produce's growth and innovation seen more clearly than in our facilities," AV Thomas, Accessed 7/15/2025.
6. Sorvino, C. "Amid Drought, Billionaires Control A Critical California Water Bank." Forbes. Sep. 20, 2025.
7. Wonderful Nurseries LLC vs. Agricultural Labor Relations Board et. al., Superior Court of Kern County, Case no. BCV-24-101649 (2024). Direct quote from p. 3.
8. OSHA. Occupational Safety and Health Administration, United States Department of Labor. Inspection Record 1699564.015 - Esparza Enterprises, Inc. 2023.
9. Hernandez, S. "She Was Killed In A Carrot Field. With Her Body Nearby, Workers Say, They Were Told To Keep Picking." Los Angeles Times. Nov. 3, 2023.
10. Lin, J. 2025. "DALE: Working Towards a Just Future for All Workers." National Immigration Project., Accessed 7/15/202

The UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment

(IRLE) advances labor research and education for workplace justice. Through the work of its units—the UCLA Labor Center, the Labor Occupational Safety and Health program (LOSH), the Strategic Research Lab, the Human Resources Roundtable, and its academic program, UCLA Labor Studies—the Institute forms wide-ranging research agendas that carry UCLA into the Los Angeles community and beyond.



University of California, Los Angeles
10945 Le Conte Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90095-1478
irle.ucla.edu

The UC Berkeley Labor Center

is a public service project of the UC Berkeley Institute for Research on Labor and Employment that links academic resources with working people. Since 1964, the Labor Center has produced research, trainings, and curricula that deepen understanding of employment conditions and develop diverse new generations of leaders.



University of California, Berkeley
2521 Channing Way
Berkeley, CA 94720-5555
(510) 642-0323
laborcenter.berkeley.edu

Suggested Citation

Flores, Jesús “Chuy,” Savannah Hunter, Cristhian Lin, Enrique Lopezlira, Justin McBride, David Mickey-Pabello, Ellen Reese, Patrick Wade, and Chris Zepeda-Millán. 2025. *State of the Unions: California Labor in 2024*. Los Angeles and Berkeley, CA: UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment, and UC Berkeley Labor Center.
<https://irle.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/state-of-the-unions-2024.pdf>.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).