State of the Unions

California Labor in 2025

UCLA College | Social Sciences
Institute for Research
on Labor & Employment

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Introduction

The landscape of union organizing and the prospects for worker power have shifted dramatically since January 2025. The Trump administration's cuts to the federal workforce, trade policies, and disruption of regulatory agency leadership have damaged specific unions while also severely constricting the entire federal labor relations system. Despite these challenges, California unions held on to their members and found creative pathways to improve workers' economic well-being.

This edition of the "State of the Unions" report offers readers insight into how California unions are faring in the face of an unfriendly federal administration, a militarized deportation campaign, and a continuing cost-of-living crisis. Part 1 provides data on union membership, NLRB elections, and strike and protest activity by unions. Part 1 also includes a report on the challenges new unions face in achieving their first contracts.

Key Findings

- **California unions grew in 2025**, adding more than 100,000 workers and increasing the share of the state's workforce represented by unions to 16.7%, outpacing the rest of the U.S.
- **16.5 million U.S. workers nationwide were represented by a union in 2025**—the highest number reported since 2009.
- These gains come despite a **steep drop in National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) elections** among private sector workers. Still, California unions were more successful in NLRB elections than the national average.
- **Private sector workers who vote to unionize face a long road to a contract victory:** 1 in 2 bargaining units formed in California in 2024 had yet to achieve a first contract by the spring of 2026.
- **California is a national hub of strikes and worker protests,** even as direct action types shift. Workers launched fewer strikes in 2025 than in recent years, yet engaged in many more forms of protest in response to issues at work and in their communities.

Following this bird's-eye view of the labor movement in California, Part 2 offers a series of case studies of workplace and community campaigns from around the state. From casino workers outside of Sacramento to baristas in Orange County, California unions continued to expand their campaigns into new workplaces and industries.

The "State of the Unions" report reflects the vibrant network of labor researchers across the University of California system. Coordinated by the Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE) at UCLA, the report highlights the unique assemblage of talent leveraging the resources of the University of California to improve the lives of California workers, inform effective policy, and train the next generation of researchers and practitioners. This edition of State of the Unions includes research contributions from labor centers across the University of California, at Berkeley, Davis, Irvine, Los Angeles, Merced, Riverside, San Diego, Santa Barbara, and Santa Cruz. This year, the UCLA IRLE and its sister institute at UC Berkeley celebrate their 80th year of work on behalf of the people of California. Launched in 1946 as the UC Institute for Industrial Relations, the Institutes carry on a legacy of progressive policy research and engagement that reaches back to the founding of the university.

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

CHAPTER 1

Union Density and Membership in California - 2025 Update

UC Berkeley Labor Center
Savannah Hunter, Enrique Lopezlira, and Patrick Wade

California union representation and membership grew in 2025. California's union density continues to be stronger than the national average (although union representation grew nationally as well), and California's union members can be found all across the Golden State. This chapter provides updated data on union representation, membership, and density in California using nationally representative data from a Bureau of Labor Statistics household survey called the Current Population Survey (CPS).[1]

Key Terms	
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.
Union members/ union membership	Workers 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.
Employment	Civilian wage and salary workers 16 years or older.
Union density	The share of employed workers represented by a union contract (union coverage density) or the share of employed workers who are members of a union (union membership density).

Union representation, membership, and density increased between 2024 and 2025

Over 2,780,000 workers in California were represented by unions in 2025; of those, about 2,490,000 (about 90%) also reported being members of their unions (see key terms box). Compared to 2024, this is an additional 110,000 union-covered workers. Union density (or the share of all employed workers represented by or members of a union) also increased. In 2025, 16.7% of Californians reported having a union compared to 16.3% in 2024. This increase is noteworthy because the rate of union density can decrease year-to-year as employment increases, even if the total number of union-represented workers remains the same. The data show that both total employment, union coverage, and union membership increased in 2025, suggesting that unions continued to add new workers to the rank and file.

Union density again held steady in California

With one in six (16.7%) workers represented by a union in 2025, California's union density continues to be stronger than the national rate, where closer to one in ten (11.2%) workers is represented by a union. However, at the national level, union density grew from 11.1% to 11.2% between 2024 and 2025 (a change that holds up even after accounting for the missing month of survey data from the fall 2025 shutdown). While this change may appear small, it represents nearly half a million additional represented workers. In total, 16.5 million U.S. workers were represented by a union in 2025—the highest number reported since 2009.

Figure 1.1 - Union Density, California and U.S., 1983-2025

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 2025, 16.7% of California workers were represented by a union, and 14.5% of California workers were members of unions.

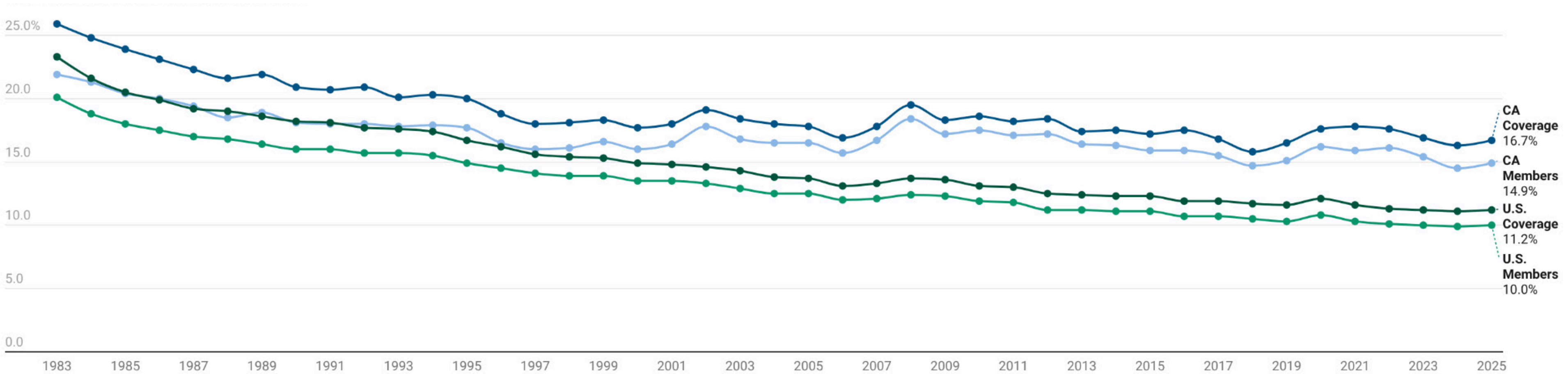


Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: Hirsch, Macpherson, and Evan (2026)

Figure 1.2 - Employment, Union Coverage, and Union Membership Levels, California, 1983-2025 (in millions)

Lines show the number of California workers employed, represented by a union (coverage), or members of unions in millions. For example, in 2025, 2.78 million California workers were covered by a union contract.

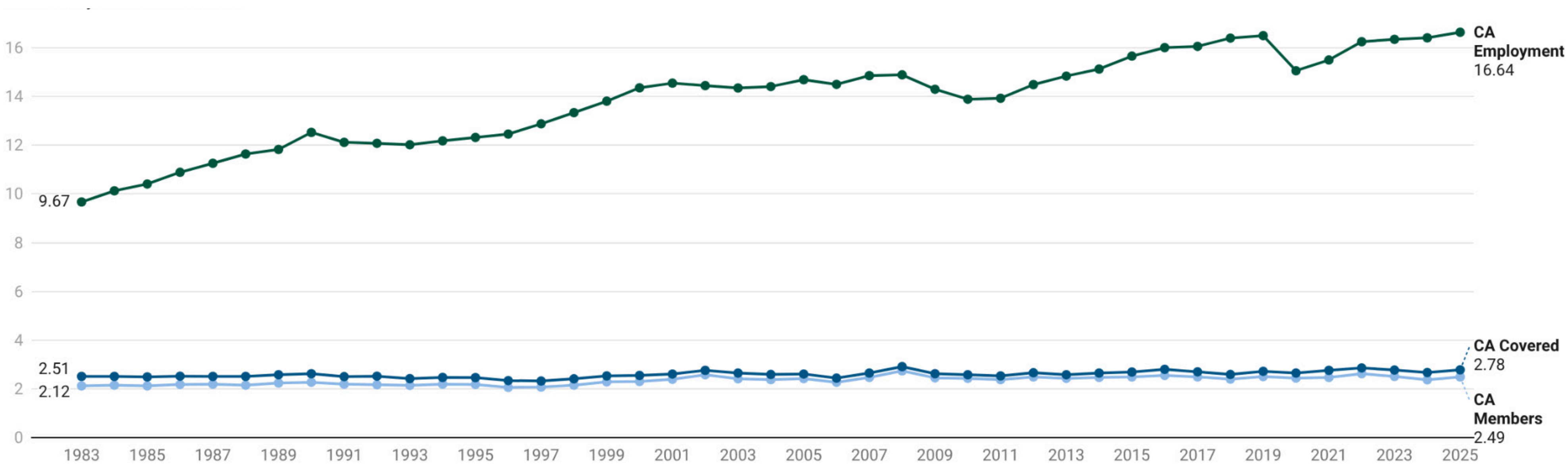


Chart: UC Berkeley Labor Center - Source: Hirsch, Macpherson, and Evan (2026)

Union members are present throughout California

To produce reliable estimates at the regional level, where single-year samples are too small, we pooled data across 2024 and 2025; as a result, these regional figures cannot be used for cross-year comparison. Union density varies modestly across regions, but union-represented workers are present in every region of the state—and each region's share of represented workers roughly tracks its share of California's workforce. (see Figure 1.3).

Figure 1.3 - Employment, Union Representation, and Union Density, California Metro Areas, 2024-2025

The 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, 33.6% of all California workers live in the Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim metro area, and 29.0% of all California workers represented by a union, or 789,791 workers, live there. Overall, 14.2% of workers living in the LA metro area are represented by a union.

Metro Areas	Total Union Represented	Share of CA Workforce	Share of CA Union Represented	Union Density in Metro Area
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim	789,791	33.6%	29.0%	14.2%
Riverside-San Bernardino-Ontario	417,497	11.6%	15.3%	21.7%
San Francisco-Oakland-Fremont	316,095	12.3%	11.6%	15.6%
San Diego-Carlsbad-San Marcos	242,432	9.0%	8.9%	16.4%
Sacramento-Arden-Arcade-Roseville	204,406	5.7%	7.5%	21.7%
Stockton-Lodi-Modesto*	128,355	3.6%	4.7%	21.8%
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara	121,269	6.2%	4.5%	11.8%
Fresno	77,484	2.5%	2.8%	18.7%
Oxnard-Thousand Oaks-Ventura	64,104	2.1%	2.4%	18.1%
Bakersfield	62,243	2.1%	2.3%	17.7%
Santa Rosa-Petaluma-Vallejo-Fairfield*	43,461	2.1%	1.6%	12.3%
Redding-Chico-Yuba City*	41,321	1.4%	1.5%	17.7%

Santa Cruz-Watsonville-Salinas*	40,798	1.5%	1.5%	15.9%
Santa Barbara-Santa Maria-Goleta	34,059	1.1%	1.3%	18.2%
Rest of CA*	140,117	5.0%	5.1%	17.0%

*These data represent estimated union coverage based on the Current Population Survey averaged over two years; estimates can fluctuate year-to-year, especially if the number of surveyed workers is small. 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 2024-2025

Endnotes

1. Barry Hirsch, David Macpherson, and William Even, *Union Membership Coverage, and Earnings from the CPS*, Union data compilations from the 2025 CPS completed January 23, 2026; Economic Policy Institute, *Current Population Survey Extracts*, Version 2026.7.8.

CHAPTER 2

Private Sector Union Organizing

UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE)
Justin McBride

Introduction

Union elections in the private sector dropped by more than 22% in 2025 amid disruptions to federal agencies. Approximately 9,800 California workers voted in a private-sector union election in 2025, about a 35% decrease from 2024. This sum accounts for less than 1 in 2,000 of the state's 18 million non-farm workers[1]—a considerable downturn from 2024. This section of the report delves into the data behind these elections for 2025.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), the federal agency overseeing most private sector union organizing efforts, had a tumultuous year in 2025. On January 25, President Donald Trump terminated Board Member Gwynne Wilcox.[2] Although Wilcox challenged the legality of her termination in court, the case remained unresolved at the close of 2025. Besides eliminating a key Biden-era appointee to the agency, the termination also broke quorum on the five-person Board, effectively paralyzing the agency's ultimate decision-making body for almost the entire year. Quorum was only restored in mid-December of 2025.[3] In other words, for 11 months of the calendar year, the Board was effectively hamstrung.

This uncertainty and paralysis at the highest levels of the federal agency overseeing private sector unionization collided with long-term understaffing at the agency. A study in early 2026, using 2025 data, found that the NLRB was 23% understaffed throughout the year, leading to further delays in case resolution throughout the agency—including in California's four NLRB regions.[4]

The agency was so paralyzed that California policymakers attempted to assert control over labor relations within the state's boundaries in the effective absence of federal regulation and oversight. State policymakers passed AB 288, which was signed by Governor Gavin Newsom in late September of 2025. The bill effectively authorized the state's public sector labor relations board, the Public Employment Relations Board (PERB), to intervene in California private sector labor disputes when the federal government was unwilling or unable to perform its statutory obligations.[5] While a federal judge blocked this attempt at the end of the year,[6] it speaks to the frustrations experienced by residents of California during the 2025 calendar year.

This section of the report uses data mined from the NLRB website to evaluate union organizing within California and beyond in 2025. Importantly, this analysis misses some key classes of workers. Public sector employees are not included under the NLRB. Agricultural laborers are overseen in California by the Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB) and are not included here, though the ALRB indicated no completed organizing drives in 2025 anywhere in the state in the agricultural sector. Finally, aerospace and rail workers are regulated by a distinct federal agency, the National Mediation Board. The analysis here refers solely to other private sector workers covered by the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA).

Despite a challenging regulatory environment, some California unions continued to bring in new members by organizing throughout the year. Using data from the NLRB, this section explores the labor organizing that did occur in California's private sector—including petitions that have experienced delays at the NLRB. As in 2024, California's organizing drives were largely concentrated in a few key industries and led by a few key international unions and their in-state affiliates. And as in 2024, the Golden State continued to lead the nation in new organizing efforts in 2025.

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 (e.g., 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. Districts are also sometimes referred to as regions.
Local	A local union is the smallest formally organized level of a union. Locals typically cover a specific geographic area, a jurisdiction over a specific type of work, or both in combination. Most unions designate locals with a number (e.g., 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 slowed the pace of organizing in 2025 from the prior year, but continued to lead the nation

California was home to 14.6% of new union-filed certification petitions nationwide, slightly higher than our 2024 proportion of 14.0%. This is above California's proportion of the nation's population of about 12%.[7]

Nationwide, new RC organizing petitions (see key terms box) dropped by 22% year-over-year from 2024 to 2025, from 2,371 to 1,942.[8] This marks the lowest level of RC petitions in the country since 2022, and roughly a return to pre-COVID levels of union filings. Unions won 54.9% of these petitions. Similarly, RM petitions nationwide dropped drastically in 2025, from 489 to 237.[9] Even with this large reduction, 2025 still marked the second highest year for RM activity in the past decade, most likely in response to the NLRB's *Cemex* ruling incentivizing employers to file for RM elections to avoid bargaining orders.[10]

Although fewer California unions filed RC petitions in 2025 than in 2024, the decline was less pronounced compared to the rest of the country. California unions filed 283 RC petitions in 2025, down from 331 in 2024. This was the lowest number of new election petitions filed in the state since the COVID crisis. Despite this drop, California's proportion of RC petitions still accounted for 13.5% of all RC petitions nationwide—a substantial amount for a single state, and roughly proportional to our state's population. California also saw 45 RM petitions filed—19.0% of the nationwide total.

Despite these impressive proportions, California unions filed fewer petitions with the NLRB between 2024 and 2025, mirroring the broader US labor movement.

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.

Figure 2.1 - RC (New Union Certification) Petitions Filed, U.S. and California, 2015-2025

The bars below show the number of new RC petitions filed in the U.S. from 2016 through 2025. The smaller bar represents activity in California, and the larger, the activity in all other parts of the nation.

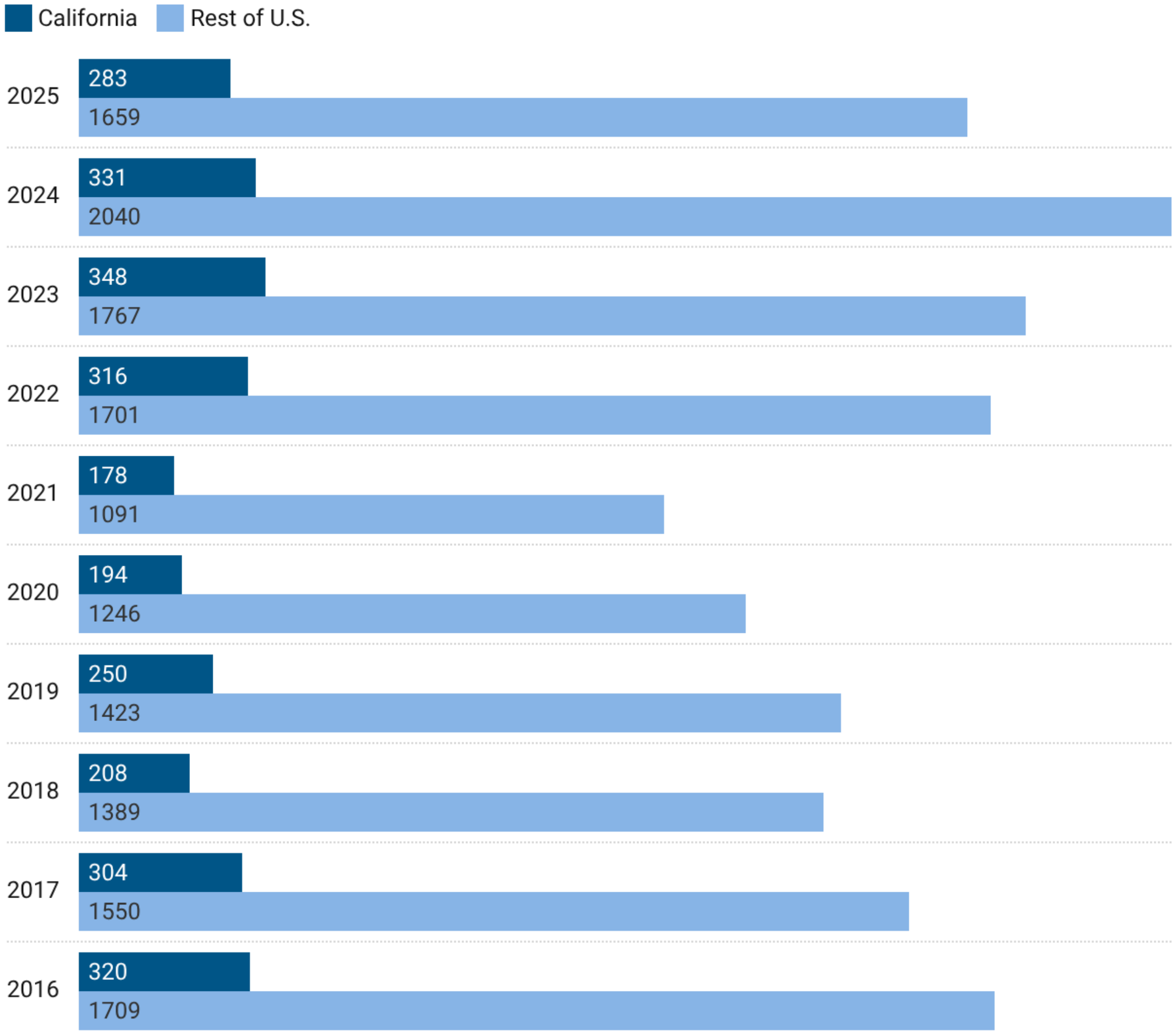


Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: NLRB Case Search

NLRB election activity slowed in 2025, but California unions continued to organize

Despite the relative year-over-year decrease in union election activity at the NLRB, California unions organized through the multiple election types supervised by the Board. Unions organized over 7,300 new members through union-initiated campaigns and kept over 500 from leaving the labor movement by prevailing in decertification votes (note that in Figure 2.2, the RD row counts a 'Win' as a win for the union, and a loss for the decertification petitioner, with the number of retained members in the ultimate column).

The number of workers covered by the RC petitions either resolved in 2025 or left open at the year's end increased by 39.6%—from 21,600 to 30,159. But although California unions prevailed in 80.1% of the 166 elections held in 2025,[11] the number of new members gained by those unions was only 6,322. This was a substantial decrease from 2024, when NLRB organizing earned California unions over 17,000 new members.

One of the main reasons for the drop in absolute new members organized was a drop in average unit size from 2024 to 2025. In 2024, there were seven union elections involving units of 500 or more workers, all of them successful. In 2025, only two votes occurred at units with over 500 workers. One was an outright victory for the union—a unit of 1,100 technical workers at the Southern California Edison electric utility voted in the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE).[12] Another vote at Siemens resulted in a loss for the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW).[13]

Figure 2.2 - NLRB Election Petition Dispositions, California, 2025

The table below shows the number of NLRB petitions either resolved in or filed during 2025, 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 12/31/25	New / Retained Members
RC (Worker Filed Certification)	324	23,240	133	22	33	37	99	6,322
RM (Mgmt Filed Certification)	45	2,832	13	0	6	13	13	929
RD (Decertification)	23	2,973	6	0	0	9	8	563
Other Election	18	1,114	1	0	0	9	8	50
TOTAL	410	30,159	158	22	39	68	128	7864

'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 12/31/2025.

Table: UCLA IRLE - Source: NLRB Case Search

Many workers, unions, and employers experienced serious delays at the NLRB in 2025

Another reason the number of new union members decreased was an overall drop in the speed of petition resolution at the Board. In 2024, the NLRB held 261 elections in California, about five per week. In 2025, this dropped to 188, 3.6 per week. The average time it took to resolve RC petitions that went to a vote increased by 22 days—over three additional weeks—as measured by the number of days between the filing of the RC petition and the closing of the case by the NLRB (regardless of the disposition).

When workers file an RC petition, the NLRB assigns a Board agent to negotiate with both the union and management over the details of the vote—the day and time of balloting, where workers will vote, which job classifications or locations are included in the union, and even what languages the ballot appears in. These negotiations usually occur relatively quickly when a neutral Board agent serves as a shuttle diplomat between the two parties, though challenges can draw out the process or even require an intervention from the Board itself in DC. In a context where Board agents were few and far between, and the Board itself lacked a quorum and thus could not rule over sticking points, petitions languished as workers awaited their chance to vote.

Another result of the upper-echelon disruption and front-line understaffing at the NLRB was a drastic increase in unresolved petitions. The NLRB entered 2025 with a backlog of 43 RC petitions statewide. The Board ended 2025 with 99 such petitions, more than doubling its case backlog despite the drop in new RC petitions filed by unions this year. Some of these were held up in various stages of employer or union-filed challenges awaiting adjudication by the non-functioning Board or courts, and some were petitions filed close to the end of the calendar year.

These unresolved petitions include some large units. The UAW filed to represent 2,500 non-tenure track faculty at the University of Southern California in December of 2024. By the end of 2025, workers still had not had a chance to vote.[14] SEIU-UHW filed to represent 1,100 radiation therapists at the City of Hope in February of 2024. They also had yet to vote by the end of 2025, and no changes appeared in the case docket throughout the entire year—indeed, since June of 2024.[15] These are but two of the almost 90 cases languishing at the Board in California at the end of 2025, awaiting a vote.

Figure 2.3 - Unresolved RC Petitions, California

The bars below show the number of open RC petitions for bargaining units within California as of December 31 of each respective year, and the average number of days between the filing of the RC petition and the closing of the case for resolved petitions regardless of disposition.

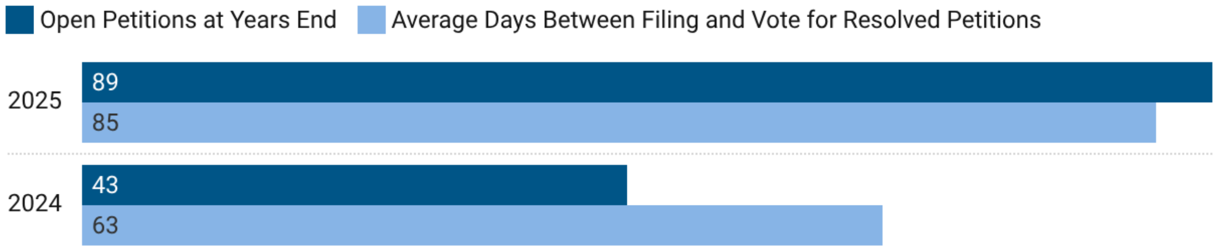


Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: NLRB Case Search

California unions continued to concentrate on select core industries, but expanded to some new areas

Union RC petitions in California in 2025 covered 74 specific industries as measured by the four-digit North American Industrial Classification System (NAICS) code.[16] Of these, only 11 industries had more than five petitions, and only five had more than ten, indicating a continued concentration of activity around select economic sectors from unions. The specific industries remained largely unchanged from 2024. The top four industries for organizing in 2025 lined up with 2024's respective top slots; three of these four industries were healthcare-related.

The top industry was once again 'snack and nonalcoholic beverage bars,' a category again led by the Starbucks campaign of Workers United, which had 26 efforts in 2025. Of these, the union won 15; three were unresolved, and only four lost—another impressive annual showing for the campaign, which concluded its fifth year in 2025.[17]

The other four of the five most important slots were concentrated in the broader health care sector, collectively accounting for one in four petitions from 2025. Unions actively organizing in this sector include SEIU affiliate United Healthcare Workers West (SEIU-UHW), the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW), the California Nurses Association (CNA), and the AFSCME-affiliated Union of American Physicians and Dentists (UAPD).

The 'grocery wholesalers' and 'museums' industries both exhibited increased organizing activity in 2025 compared to the prior year, with seven petitions each. The former was a result of a wave of Teamster organizing in food and beverage distribution centers. The latter largely resulted from simultaneous elections for three distinct units at two cultural institution employers (an art academy and a zoo), which totaled six of the seven petitions. Though in each case three bargaining units were involved, the underlying organizing was almost certainly a single campaign in each case.

Figure 2.4 - Number of RC Petitions Filed by Industry, California, 2025

The table below shows the number of 2025 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, 2025	% of all RC Petitions, 2025	% of all RC Petitions, 2024
7225	Snack and nonalcoholic beverage bars	35	10.8%	10.9%
6221	General medical and surgical hospitals	33	10.2%	10.5%
6211	Office of mental health physicians	17	5.2%	5.0%
6214	Kidney dialysis centers	15	4.6%	7.5%
6219	Miscellaneous ambulatory health care services	11	3.4%	1.1%
4244	Other grocery product merchant wholesalers	7	2.2%	1.4%
7212	Museums	7	2.2%	0.8%
	All Other NAICS Codes (67 total)	199	61.4%	53.1%

Table: UCLA IRLE - Source: NLRB Case Search

Organizing in the private sector continued to be concentrated at a select few unions in 2025

Thirty-one international union affiliates engaged in some kind of private sector organizing under the NLRB's RC process in 2025, in addition to a handful of independent union efforts. However, these organizing efforts were not evenly distributed. As in 2024, a select group of unions accounted for the majority of private sector organizing drives. A single international union accounted for one-third of new organizing drives in the state, and another four unions for another third. Affiliates of 19 international unions were involved in fewer than five RC drives each—one every other month.

At the top spot, SEIU-affiliated locals accounted for one in three elections filed or resolved in 2026, a total of 83 campaigns. This was the same amount of activity as the 26 least active international unions combined. The second most active union, the Teamsters, had only 40 active organizing efforts in the RC system in 2025, a notable decrease from their 2024 activity and a considerably smaller amount than SEIU.

SEIU's impressive organizing year represents an increase in the absolute number of petitions filed, from 69 to 83, between 2024 and 2025. As mentioned above, many of these petitions (26 in all) were a result of the SEIU-affiliated Workers United Starbucks Workers United campaign. The balance of drives was largely concentrated in health care organizing, including continued efforts to organize dialysis clinics by SEIU-UHW and several larger bargaining units at hospitals throughout the state.

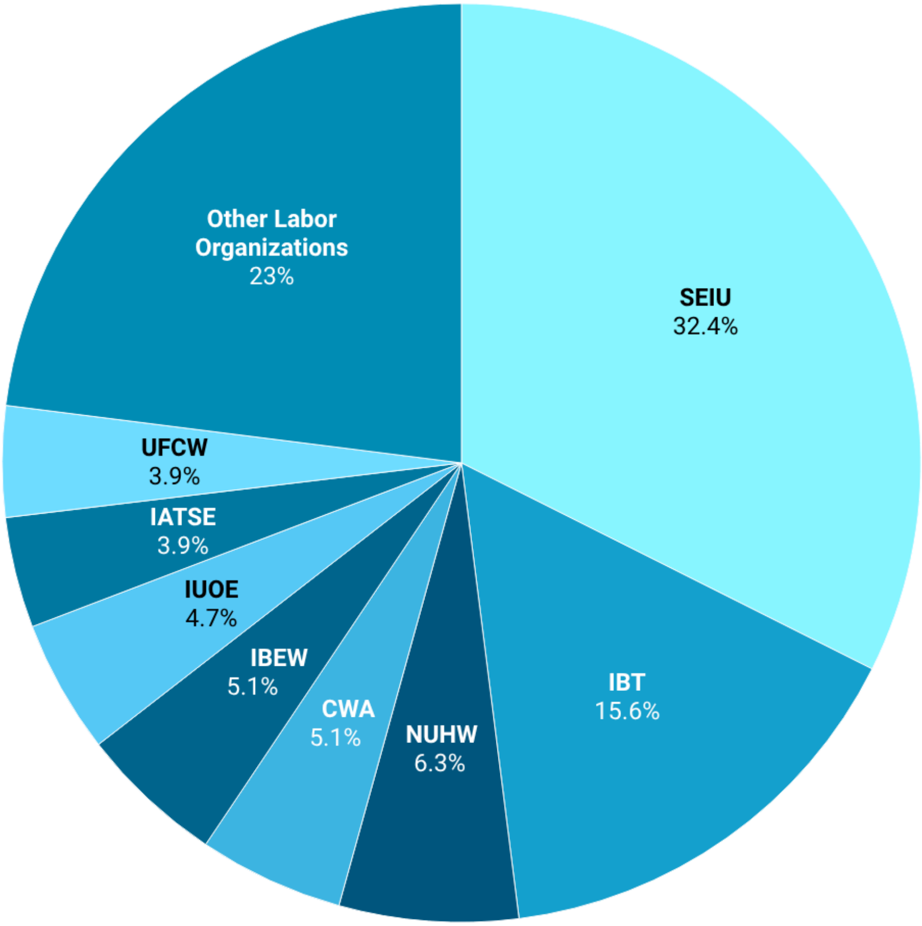
Indeed, only five unions increased their organizing in 2025 from the prior year, as measured by RC campaigns—SEIU, NUHW, the Communication Workers of America (CWA), the Laborers' International Union of North America (LIUNA), and UNITE HERE. All other California unions were involved in fewer private sector organizing campaigns via the RC process in 2025 compared to the prior year.

In terms of absolute number of workers involved, SEIU again took the lead by a long shot with just under 5,000 workers involved in organizing drives, unsurprising given the relatively large hospital units the union organized and the sheer volume of smaller dialysis clinics and Starbucks establishments. The IBEW came in second, at about 2,000 workers, though roughly half of these were involved in the ill-fated organizing drive at Siemens, which the union ultimately lost.

NUHW and CNA both increased the number of workers involved in their drives substantially in 2025 from the prior year. For the NUHW, these numbers stem from several relatively larger healthcare units across the state. The union sought to represent workers at six units with over 100 workers, winning three votes, including a 320-person unit at the Anaheim Regional Medical Center. Two other petitions remained unresolved at the close of 2025. For their part, CNA sought to represent workers in only three units, but each accounted for over 300 potential new members. None of those efforts were resolved by the close of the year; one of these, a unit at an Adventist hospital in Lodi, has been unresolved since 2023.

Figure 2.5 - RC Petitions by Parent Union, California, 2025 (256 total)

This chart shows the percentages of all RC petitions filed in California in 2025, sorted by international union.

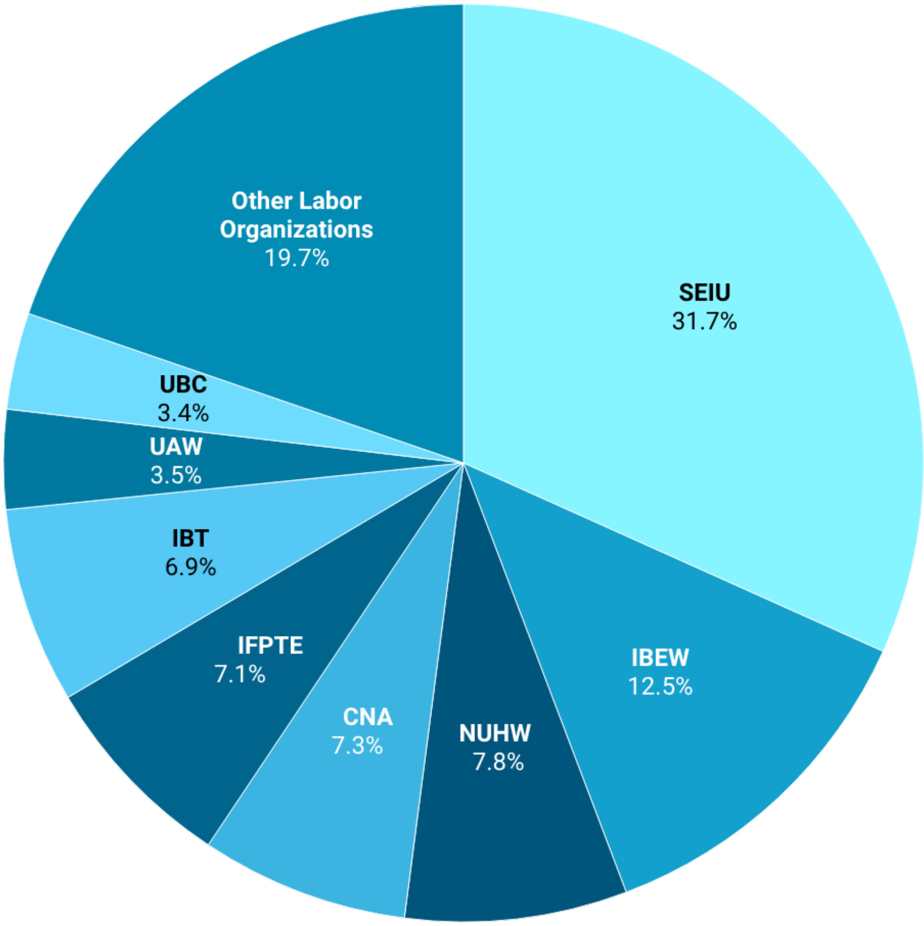


SEIU = Service Employees International Union. IBT = Teamsters. NUHW = National Union of Healthcare Workers. CWA = Communications Workers. IBEW = Electrical Workers. IUOE = Operating Engineers. IATSE = Theatrical Stage Employees. UFCW = Food & Commercial Workers.

Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: NLRB Case Search

Figure 2.6 - Number of Workers Covered by RC Petition by Parent Union, California, 2025 (15,715 in total)

This chart shows the number of workers covered by all 2025 California RC petitions, sorted by international union.



SEIU = Service Employees International Union. IBEW = Electrical Workers. NUHW = National Union of Healthcare Workers. CNA = California Nurses Association. IBT = Teamsters. UAW = United Auto Workers. UBC = Carpenters.

Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: NLRB Case Search

Conclusion

Union organizing under a dysfunctional NLRB presented substantial challenges nationwide for unions, and California unions were no exception. Despite these challenges, unions continued to organize under the NLRA in large numbers. Ultimately, the decreases in organizing under the purview of the Board remained equivalent to pre-COVID levels. California organizing drives continued to enjoy a substantially higher win rate than drives from other parts of the country.

Not all organizing occurs under the supervision of the NLRB. California unions continued to push the envelope for building worker power in a variety of other ways throughout 2025, despite the challenges within the agency itself. Following chapters provide a few case study examples of the ways in which California workers exerted demands and built power in 2025 despite a challenging political and regulatory environment.

Endnotes

1. State of California Labor and Workforce Development Agency, *2025 California Jobs Market Report No. DE 864 Rev. 3* (2025).
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4. Robert Iafolla, "Labor Board Regions Struggle With Understaffing as Cases Pile Up," *Bloomberg Law: Daily Labor Report.* February 10, 2026. Accessed April 8, 2026.
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6. Chris Marr, "NLRB Wins Court Order Blocking California's New Labor Board Law," *Bloomberg Law: Daily Labor Report.* December 27, 2026.
7. Based on values reported in the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey Total Population 5-Year Estimates, Table B01003, 2024.
8. National Labor Relations Board. *Report: Representation Petitions – RC*. Accessed April 8, 2026.
9. National Labor Relations Board. *Report: Representation Petitions – RM*. Accessed April 8, 2026.
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. The future of Cemex orders remains uncertain at the time of writing, given legal challenges.
11. Measured as the ratio of wins to the total of wins and losses. This ratio follows the methodology used by Kate Bronfenbrenner, *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.
12. NLRB Case. no. 21-RC-363966. Southern California Edison Company. Accessed April 8, 2026.
13. NLRB Case No. 20-RC-360009. Siemens Mobility, Inc. Accessed April 8, 2026.
14. NLRB Case No. 31-RC-356388. University of Southern California. Accessed April 8, 2026.
15. NLRB Case No. 21-RC-335061. City of Hope National Medical Center. Accessed April 8, 2026.

16. 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 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.
17. "Our Story," Starbucks Workers United, accessed April 8, 2026.

CHAPTER 3

Securing a First Contract

UC Labor Centers

Introduction

California has been at the crest of a renewed wave of labor organizing, from the historic "Hot Labor Summer" of 2023 to the subsequent growth of solidarity across tourism, food service, health, education, and entertainment sectors. California workers have relentlessly pursued union drives, drawing tactical support from one another's campaigns and generating excitement and public visibility through major certification election victories. Despite decades of anti-union pressures nationally, union density in California remains resilient, holding steady even as union membership has fallen across the country.[1]

Workers in the private sector can form unions either by voting for union representation through an election overseen by the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) or, in some cases, by securing voluntary recognition from the employer. In an election, workers file a petition, and if a simple majority supports unionization, the union is certified as the representative of the bargaining unit.

In recent years, high-profile union election victories have drawn national attention and renewed momentum for organizing drives. However, the trajectory of a union campaign extends beyond the initial organizing efforts and election win. What often receives less public attention is the months or years it takes for workers to secure a first contract after winning a union election.

Regardless of how contentious the relationship between the union and employers may become during the organizing campaign and election, the expectation is that once a union is certified, both parties will shift to mutual cooperation and engage in good-faith bargaining. Yet, for some employers, the bargaining stage presents another opportunity to resist the unionization process.[2] Employer opposition significantly reduces the likelihood that a union will secure a first contract. Employers may hold captive audience meetings, hire outside consultants, spread rumours, and intentionally delay contract signing as unions try to negotiate.[3] Corporations spend billions of dollars annually on union avoidance consultants, including efforts aimed at delaying or undermining the first-contract negotiations.[4]

Numerous studies have documented the gap between winning an election and winning that first contract. A study of 8,000 successful union elections nationally between 1999 and 2004 projected that only 38% negotiated a first contract within the first year of certification.[5] A survey of 126 bargaining units found that only 37% of unions that won an election nationwide in 2018 secured a contract in the first year. The study also found it took an average of 350 days to ratify a first contact.[6] More recently, data from 391 contracts between 2005 and 2022 revealed the average time-to-contract was over 400 days, with an average of over 500 days for 2020-2022 data.[7]

Unions and employers have a legal obligation to bargain in good faith under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA), but there is no legal requirement for the two to reach an agreement.[8] A bargaining unit becomes increasingly vulnerable over time when a first contract isn't secured. These newly established unions remain susceptible to employer resistance, anti-union tactics, and declining morale among members. Yet without penalties or enforceable deadlines, first contracts can remain in limbo indefinitely, without consequences.

About the study

This research was conducted by the UC Labor Centers at the request of the California Federation of Labor Unions to better understand the status of first contracts after workers voted to join a union in California. Though there are national studies on first contracts, there is no research that looks specifically at California. This study aims to fill that gap, focusing on private employer elections.

We used case data from the NLRB on union election outcomes. The database includes the representing union, employer, city, industry, number of workers, number of workers eligible to vote, and voting results. We limited cases to those that closed in 2024.

In California, workers filed 372 Certification of Representative (RC) petitions to establish a union at their worksite covering 21,600 workers. These petitions were either filed in 2024 or filed in an earlier year but resolved in 2024.

Of those petitions filed or resolved in 2024, 55% (204 petitions) resulted in election wins, covering 17,387 workers. Of the remaining 168 cases: 17 petitions were challenged, 40 resulted in an election loss, and 68 were withdrawn or dismissed. An additional 43 cases remained unresolved as of 12/31/2024.

For this study, we wanted to understand what percentage of the 204 union election victories resulted in negotiated first contracts. Over a dozen staff from across the UC Labor Centers collaborated on this project. They divided the list by regions and contacted unions to confirm the status of the first contract. We also searched on union websites and news stories for additional updates. Our outreach was conducted between February and April 2026.

Of the 204 election wins identified, we were able to verify the status of 164 cases, constituting 80% of all the 2024 election wins, which involved almost 16,000 workers. The findings presented in this brief are based only on those cases in which the status of the first contract was confirmed.

Findings: Status of first contracts

This section provides the results for first contracts, broken out by the number of election cases and the number of workers in the bargaining unit. We further break down the analysis by key regions in California, major industries, and bargaining unit size.

Our research was limited to union-reported yes/no outcomes on the status of the first contracts, and did not explore the factors that led to the success of the contract negotiations.

> 1 in 2 bargaining units where workers voted for union representation in 2024 still had not secured a first contract more than a year later.

Our research found that 50% of union elections resulted in a first contract by April 2026, more than a year after they voted and were certified.

Most of the unresolved cases (43%) were still negotiating their first contract. In 7% of the cases, bargaining had ended for a range of reasons, including union decertification, unit dissolution, business closures, or layoffs or terminations affecting workers in the unit.

7,998 workers were in a bargaining unit that had secured a contract, while 6,646 workers were still engaged in negotiations. About 1,330 workers were in units where bargaining ended without a contract.

First contract status by industry

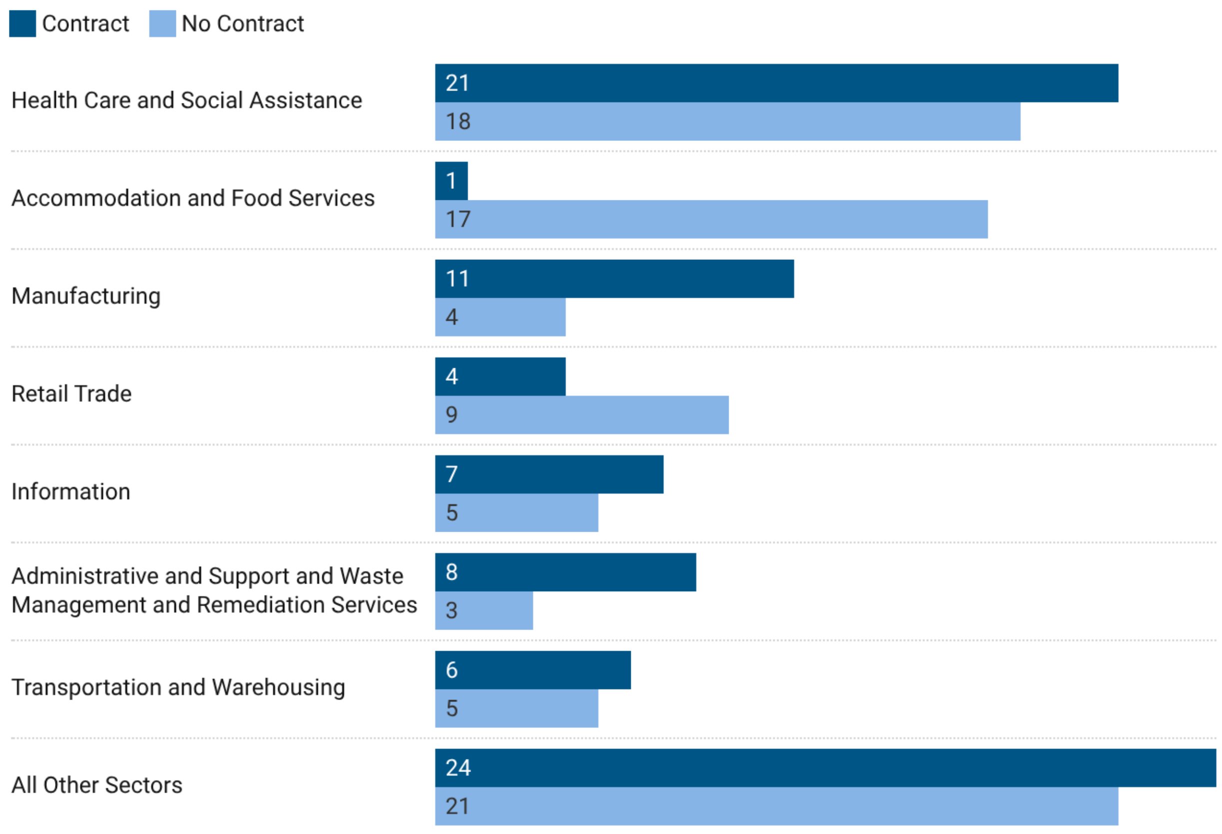
Among the cases in our sample, the main industries with the most union election wins were in health care and social assistance, accommodation and food services, and manufacturing.

Outcomes for the first contracts varied across industries: manufacturing and administrative and support and waste management saw greater success, while accommodation and food services and retail remained engaged in ongoing negotiations.

The size of bargaining units in our sample varied across industries. Health care and social assistance accounted for 39 cases involving over 6,000 workers. Education, by contrast, had 10 cases representing nearly 4,000 workers, while arts, entertainment, and recreation had 6 cases involving nearly 1,900 workers.

Figure 3.1 - First contract status by industry and bargaining unit

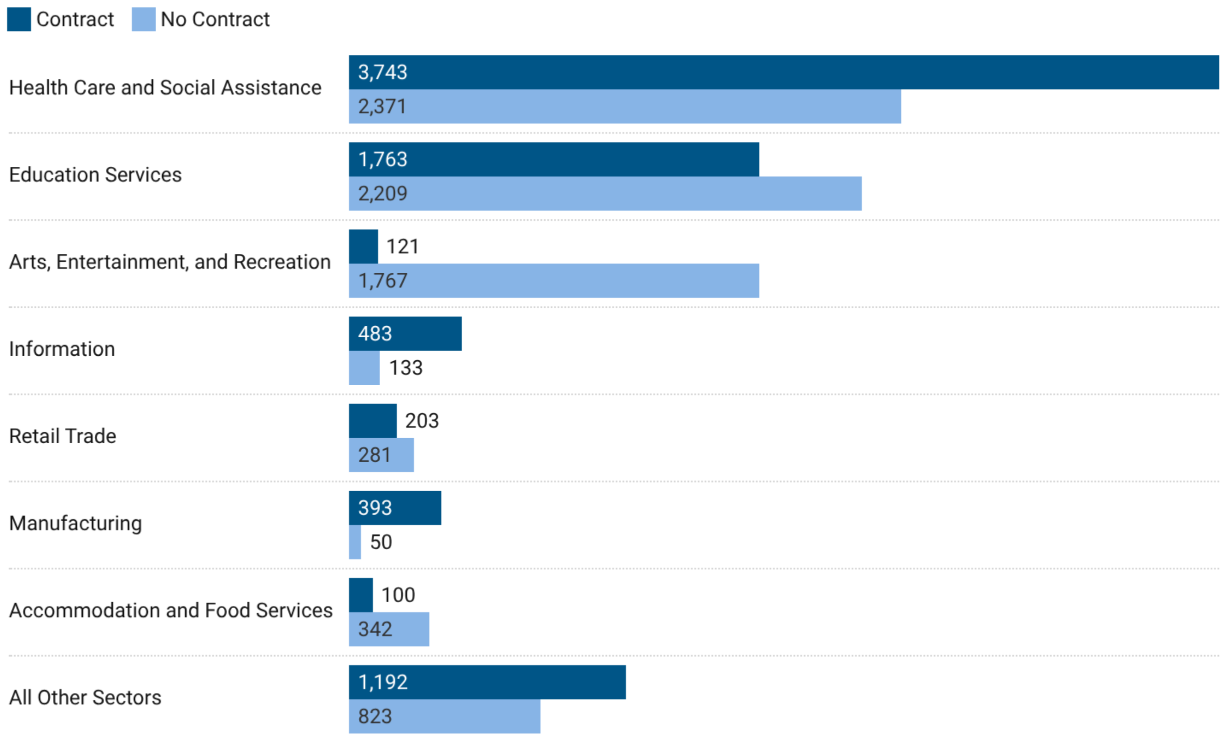
This chart shows the number of new bargaining units formed in 2024 that had ratified a first contract with their employers by April 2026 compared to those that had not, grouped by industry.



Source: UC Labor Centers

Figure 3.2 - First contract status by industry and total workers

This chart shows the number of workers represented by new unions formed in 2024 who won a first contract by April 2026 compared to those who did not, grouped by industry.



Source: UC Labor Centers

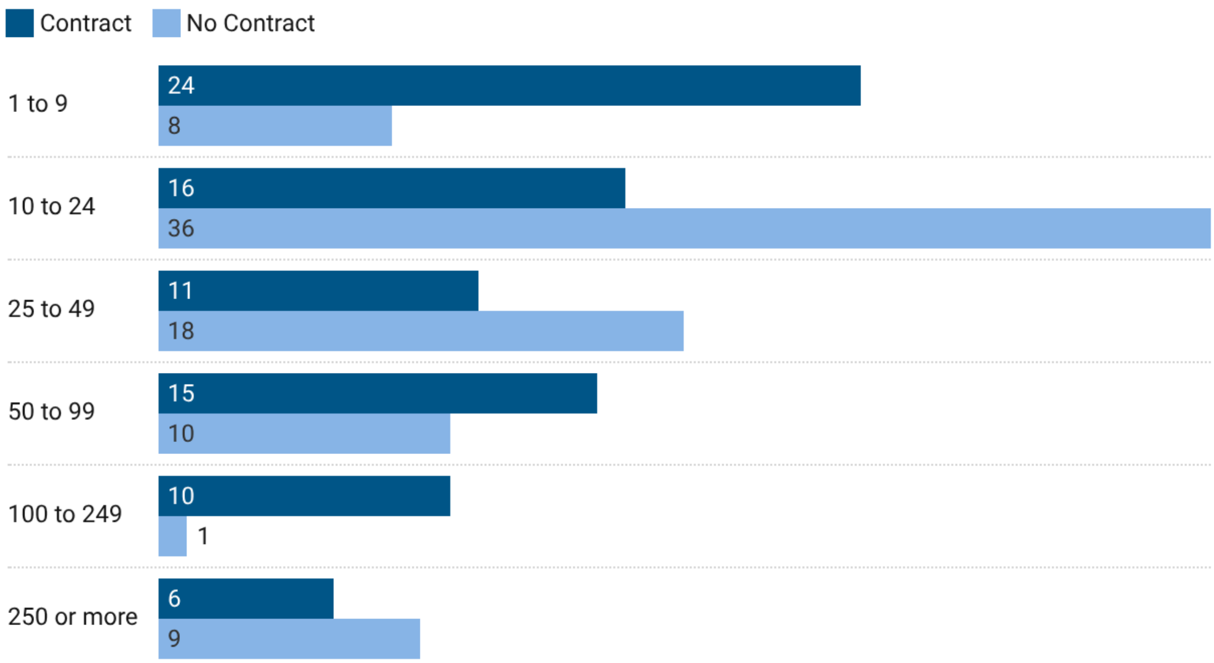
First contract status by bargaining unit size

The smallest bargaining units, those with fewer than 10 workers and comprising 32 cases, experienced considerable success, with three-quarters securing first contracts. Most of the large units, consisting of 11 cases with between 100 and 249 workers, had also secured over 90% of their contracts.

As bargaining unit size increased, so did the total number of workers represented and covered by contracts. The largest bargaining units, those with more than 250 workers and comprising 15 cases, achieved first contracts in 40% of their cases, securing contracts for over 4,800 workers. This was followed by bargaining units with 100 to 249 workers, which secured contracts covering nearly 1,400 workers.

Figure 3.3 - First contract status by unit size and bargaining unit

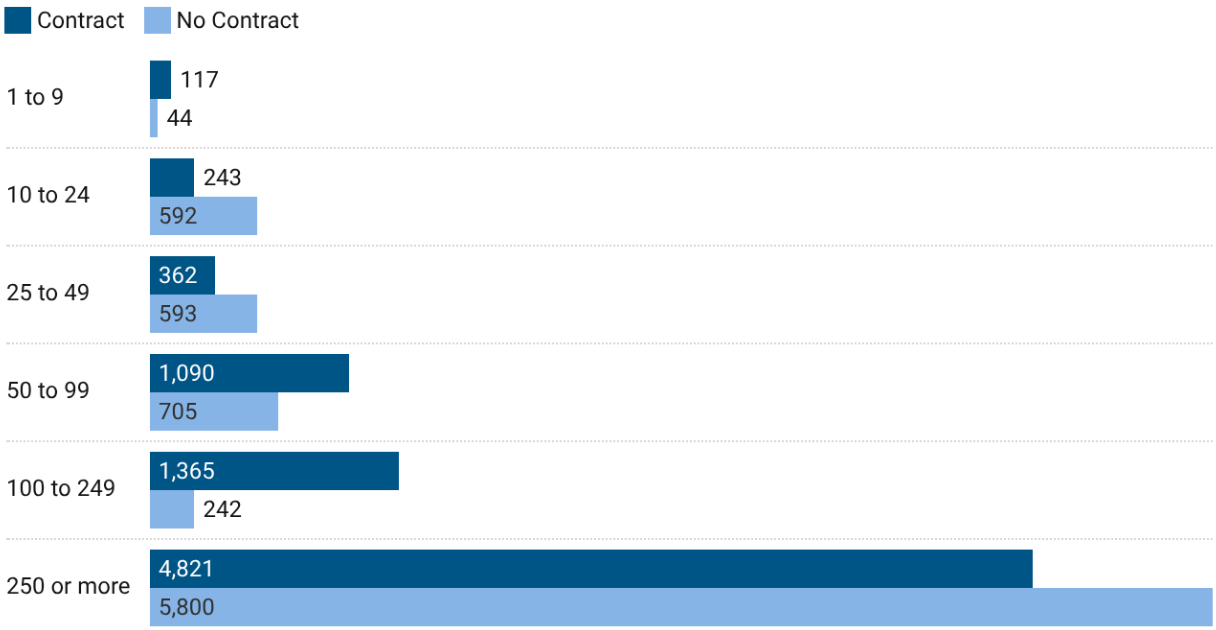
This chart shows the number of new unions formed in 2024 that won a first contract by April 2026 compared to those that did not, grouped by the number of workers in the bargaining unit.



Source: UC Labor Centers

Figure 3.4 - First contract status by unit size and total workers

This chart shows the number of workers represented by new unions formed in 2024 who won a first contract by April 2026 compared to those who did not, grouped by bargaining unit size.



Source: UC Labor Centers

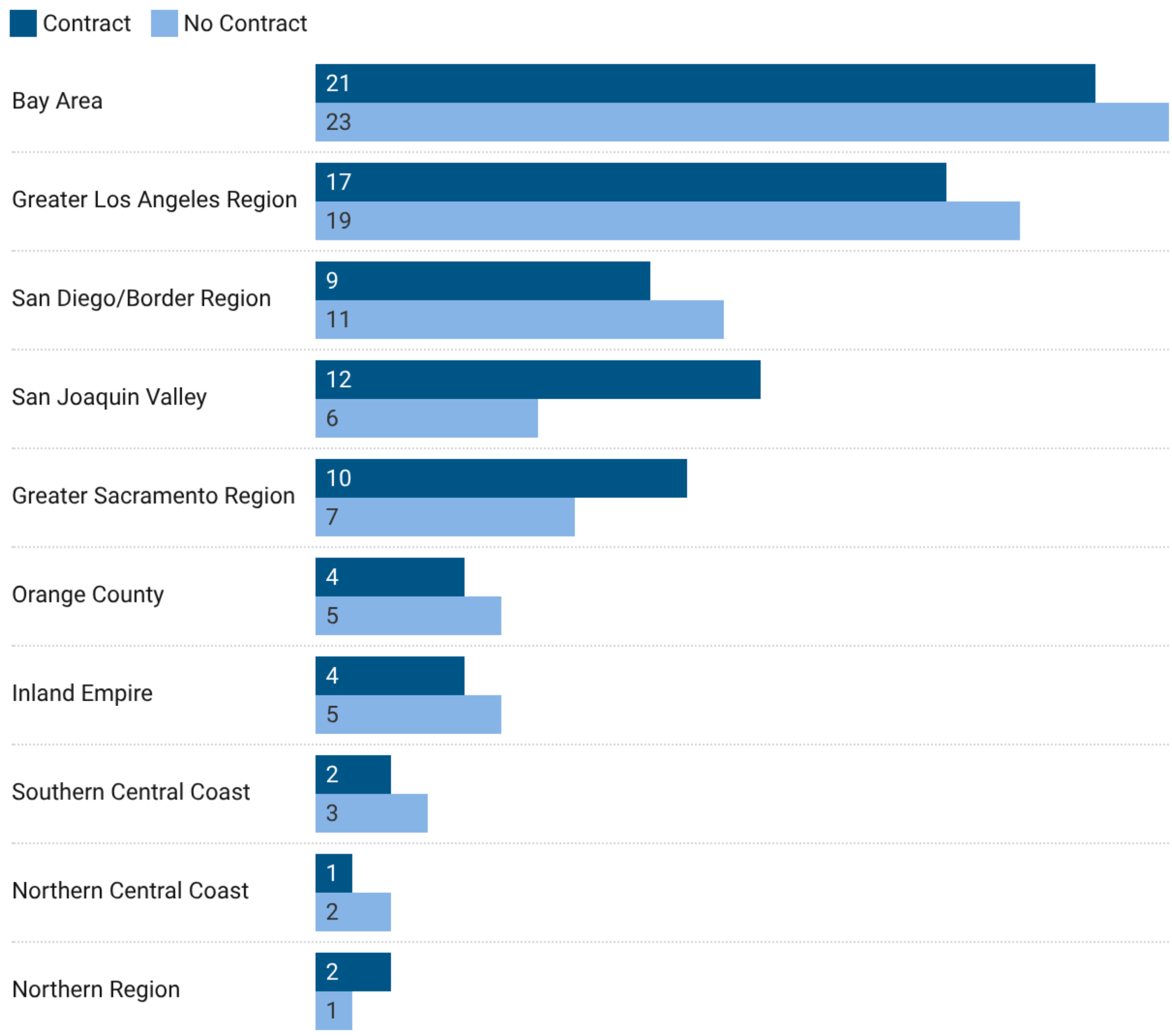
First contract status by region

Regionally, most areas in the state consistently secured contracts in about half of their cases. The San Joaquin Valley, with 18 cases, the Northern region, with three cases, and the Greater Sacramento region, with 17 cases, fared better, securing contracts in roughly two-thirds of their cases.

In terms of the number of workers impacted, the Los Angeles region secured contracts for about half of the nearly 5,500 workers represented in a bargaining unit. The San Diego/Border region secured contracts for approximately 2,600 of its nearly 4,000 workers. In California's rural Northern region, unions secured contracts for 157 of 163 workers (96%).

Figure 3.5 - First contract status by region and bargaining unit

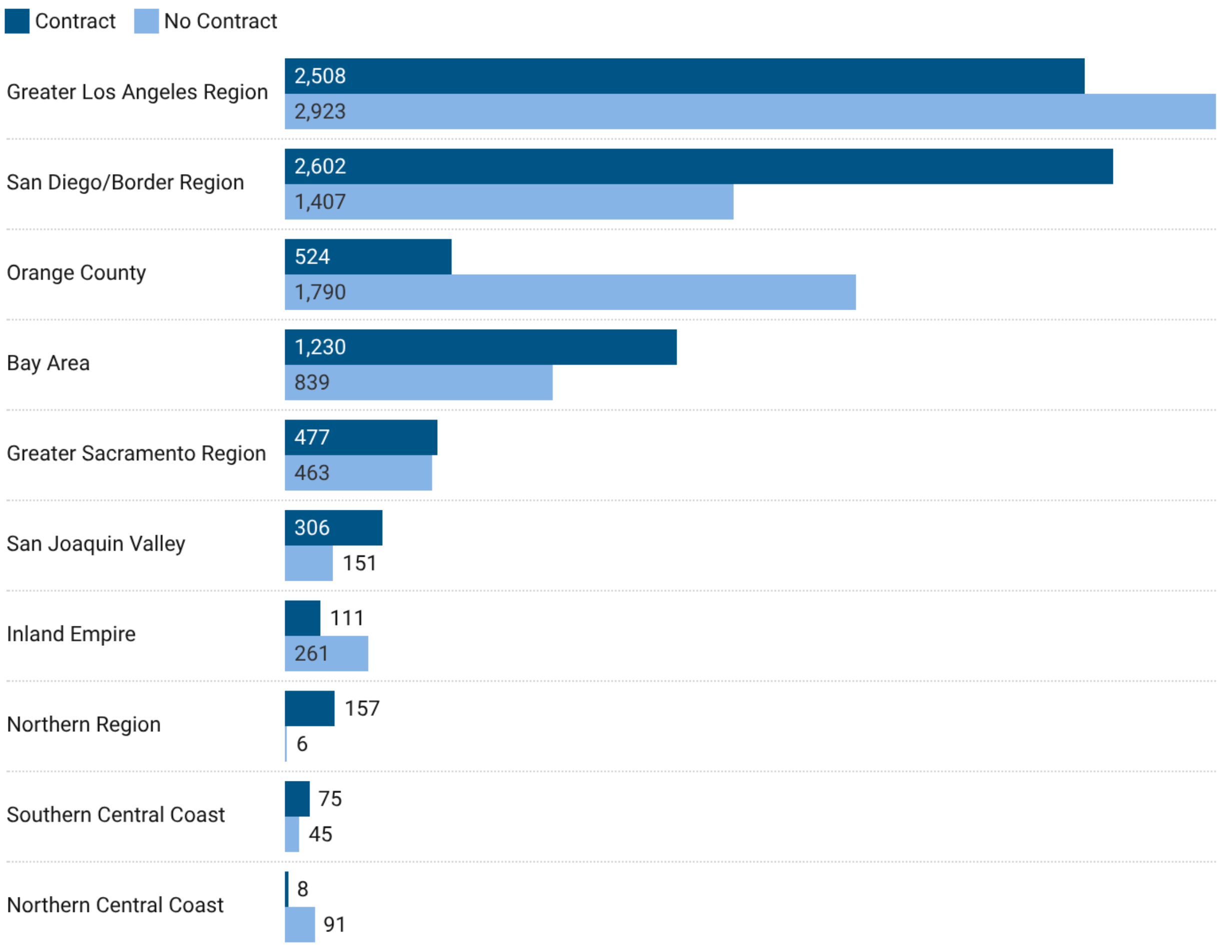
This chart shows the number of new unions formed in 2024 that won a first contract by April 2026 compared to those that did not, grouped by region.



Source: UC Labor Centers

Figure 3.6 - First contract status by region and total workers

This chart shows the number of workers represented by new unions formed in 2024 who won a first contract by April 2026 compared to those who did not, grouped by region.



Source: UC Labor Centers

Conclusion

Our data presents a sobering picture of the barriers workers face in securing collective bargaining rights. While a majority of filing units win their election, many organizing efforts struggle to secure an enforceable contract. If 100 units file a petition to establish a union, our data shows that 55 would successfully certify the union. And only half of those would secure a contract within a reasonable timeframe. In other words, for all those workers who initiate a union petition, only one in four of them would expect to succeed in reaching a contract within our study's timeframe.

These findings underscore the lengthy and difficult process of union organizing. Winning an election should mark the establishment of union representation in the workplace, reflecting the clear choice made by workers through a democratic vote. However, our research shows that an election victory is often followed by a prolonged struggle to achieve the first contract. This leads to a delay in the realization of benefits and protections that workers sought through unionization. The data suggest that stronger measures are needed to ensure timely completion of the bargaining process, such as enforceable bargaining deadlines, stronger penalties for bad faith negotiations and union-busting practices, and mandatory arbitrations if a contract isn't achieved in a specified timeframe.

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Regions:

Bay Area:

- Alameda, Contra Costa, Mendocino, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano and Sonoma

Greater Los Angeles Region:

- Los Angeles

Greater Sacramento Region:

- Placer, Sacramento, Yolo, and Yuba

Inland Empire:

- Riverside and San Bernardino

Northern Central Coast:

- Monterey and Santa Cruz

Northern Region:

- Butte, Humboldt, and Nevada

Orange County:

- Orange

San Diego/Border Region:

- San Diego and Imperial

San Joaquin:

- Fresno, Kern, Merced, San Joaquin, Stanislaus, and Tulare

Southern Central Coast:

- San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, and Ventura

The following 25 counties did not have new bargaining units in 2024:

- Alpine, Amador, Calaveras, Colusa, Del Norte, El Dorado, Glenn, Inyo, Kings, Lake, Lassen, Madera, Marin, Mariposa, Modoc, Mono, Plumas, San Benito, Shasta, Sierra, Siskiyou, Sutter, Tehama, Trinity, and Tuolumne

Endnotes

1. Savannah Hunter, Enrique Lopezlira, and Patrick Wade, "A Profile of Union Workers in the Golden State," in *State of the Unions: California Labor in 2024* (UCLA Institute for Research on Labor & Employment and UC Berkeley Labor Center, 5). August, 2025.
2. Paul Weiler, "Striking a new balance: freedom of contract and the prospects for union representation," *Harvard Law Review* (1984): 351-420.
3. John Kallas, Dongwoo Park, and Rachel Aleks. "Breaking the Deadlock: How Union and Employer Tactics Affect First Contract Achievement," *Industrial Relations Journal* 54, no. 3 (2023): 223–41.
4. Margaret Poydock, Teke Wiggin, and Celine McNicholas, *U.S. Employers Spend More Than $1.5 Billion Annually on Union Avoidance* (Economic Policy Institute and LaborLab, May 2026).
5. John-Paul Ferguson, "The Eyes of the Needles: A Sequential Model of Union Organizing Drives, 1999–2004," *ILR Review* 62, no. 1 (2008): 3–21.
6. Kallas, Park, and Aleks, "Breaking the Deadlock."
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CHAPTER 4

Strikes and Direct Actions

UCLA Institute for Research on Labor and Employment (IRLE)
Justin McBride and Chris Zepeda-Millán

Introduction

California unions continued their militancy in 2025 through strikes and other forms of protest against employers, and even the federal government. Golden State unions have historically led the nation when it comes to strikes and worker protests, and 2025 continued this trend. According to a joint Cornell University and University of Illinois report tracking 2025 nationwide strike statistics, 77.1% of all workplace strikes occurred in the country's western region and were heavily concentrated in California.[1]

Overall, California unions continued to strike at an aggressive pace in 2025, although scaled back from 2024 heights. But despite a relative slowdown in strikes, in 2025, California unions engaged in more protests that garnered media attention than the prior year and expanded their target beyond their immediate employers to protest federal policy issues, such as those related to austerity and immigration enforcement measures. The resulting aggregate of strikes and other direct actions marked an increase in worker militancy from 2024.

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.[2] The project collects data on labor-related actions nationwide by web scraping media coverage. We utilized this data, filtered for California, and removed any observations that were not initiated by a union or a worker center.[3] While the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) also tracks worker strikes, it does not disaggregate its findings by region. To our knowledge, the Labor Action Tracker is the only data source that provides a comprehensive take on worker action by geographic location.

That said, while the Labor Action Tracker is an invaluable tool, 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 and dramatic actions, the media 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 labor actions in the state of California in 2025, but rather as a roadmap of the largest and most visible of such activities during the calendar year.

California labor organizations struck and protested frequently throughout 2025

Much as in the prior year, the California labor movement kept up a feverish pace of actions—both strikes and protests—in 2025. Almost every other day, a new action began in California. While the number of strikes decreased to the lowest level since the COVID era, California's union and worker centers held the second-highest number of press-documented protests since the Labor Action Tracker began collecting data, with roughly 2 protests per week throughout the year receiving media attention.

In 2025, strike activity nationwide scaled back substantially. According to the BLS, the number of workdays idled due to strikes dropped by 40.8% from 2024 to 2025, with the former year itself exhibiting an even more substantial drop from 2023. All in all, nationwide, the number of idled days dropped from 16,673,000 in 2023 to a mere 1,991,000 in 2025.[4] California unions largely bucked this trend. While the number of strikes versus the overall number of idled days is not a direct comparison, the 2025 decrease in California new strikes initiated was nowhere near as drastic as this two-year national trend of decline.

It is perhaps unsurprising that California's labor movement increased its non-strike protest activity in 2025, given the national climate of protest sparked by actions of the Trump administration, particularly against immigrant workers and federal government employees, two traditional bases of the California labor movement. The U.S. saw the largest number of protests in decades, with almost 11,000 protests reported nationwide challenging the federal government's policies.[5] Many members of California's labor movement almost certainly participated in many of these broader mass mobilizations, which are not captured in this data. But the labor movement itself also initiated protests on an increased scale from prior years, which we turn to below.

While many of 2025's 100 labor-led protests were 'typical' labor actions against employers around working conditions or bargaining-related issues, unions also looked beyond their traditional targets. Fifteen of the 100 documented protests led by California's labor movement were at least partially either in support of immigrant workers or in direct response to aggressive federal immigration actions in California communities. Of these, 11 took place in Los Angeles County, which also saw some of the most aggressive tactics and largest deployments of federal officers around Trump's immigration enforcement policies. These efforts by the federal government spiked in the summer months[6] and eventually included a deployment of the National Guard and U.S. Marines to police portions of the county.[7]

Notably, during this intense period of state repression over the summer, SEIU United Service Workers West (USWW) President David Huerta was shoved to the ground and arrested outside of a Downtown Los Angeles garment factory during an anti-Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) action. Unions organized a large protest in Grand Park against the ICE raids and in support of Huerta, which thousands of people attended.[8] Huerta was ultimately imprisoned for three days.[9]

Several of these immigration-related protests were specifically organized by day laborers and advocates affiliated with the National Day Laborer Organizing Network (NDLON) to protest both ICE actions against day laborers at Home Depot and the big box store's refusal to intervene. NDLON's associated boycott of Home Depot continues as this report goes to press.[10]

Immigration enforcement was not the only federal policy to instigate union direct actions. Federal employee unions and other parts of the labor movement also engaged in numerous protests against the Trump administration's efforts to impose austerity[11] and curtail federal employee collective bargaining rights.[12] Fifteen of the 100 labor-led protests throughout the year focused on some aspects of federal attacks against working people, with eight of these led at least in part by the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), a large union of federal government workers and one of the unions most directly impacted by Trump's labor relations policy.

Figure 4.1 - Strikes and Protests, California, 2021-2025

The chart below shows the number of strikes and protests reported by the Labor Action Tracker in the last five years. The darker line shows the number of strikes, and the lighter line shows the number of protests.

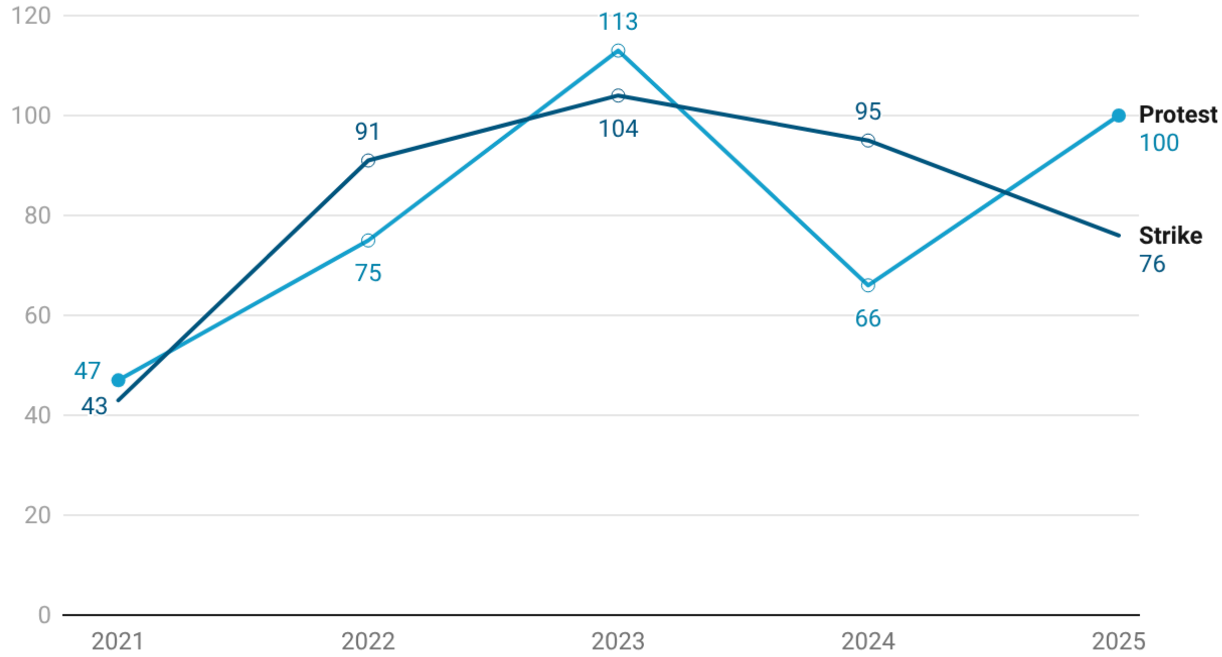


Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: Kallas, J., Iyer, D. K., & Friedman, E. (2025). "Labor Action Tracker." Cornell University ILR School & University of Illinois LER School

A large number of unions engaged in strikes and protests in 2025

California labor organizations took to the streets in 2025, resulting in a more active overall labor movement compared to the previous year. In 2024, 27 labor organizations engaged in at least one organized protest or strike action. In 2025, this number increased by 22% (33). In 2024, one single union, SEIU, organized 48% of all strikes or protests statewide. In 2025, while SEIU remained the most active union in the movement in terms of absolute number of protests organized, its relative proportion dropped to 27.5% due to a large increase in other union and labor organization activities.

Unions that had a relatively slow 2024 in terms of direct actions became leaders of the California labor movement in 2025. The number of recorded actions featuring the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) increased by almost five times, from five total actions in 2024 to 24 in 2025. AFGE, for which the Labor Tracker registered no protests of any kind in 2024, organized eight in 2025. The Labor Tracker recorded roughly double the activity from three unions: the California Nurses Association (CNA), the Communications Workers of America (CWA), and the Teamsters.

Perhaps most pointedly, the share of protest activity by other less historically active labor organizations also jumped. In 2024, labor organizations outside of the most active ones held 28 total actions—18 strikes and 10 protests. In 2025, while the level of strikes remained roughly constant (19), the number of protests increased more than fourfold. Unions like the Orange County Employees Association (OCEA), the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), and the National Association of Letter Carriers (NALC) all participated in organizing at least one protest covered by the Labor Tracker in 2025.

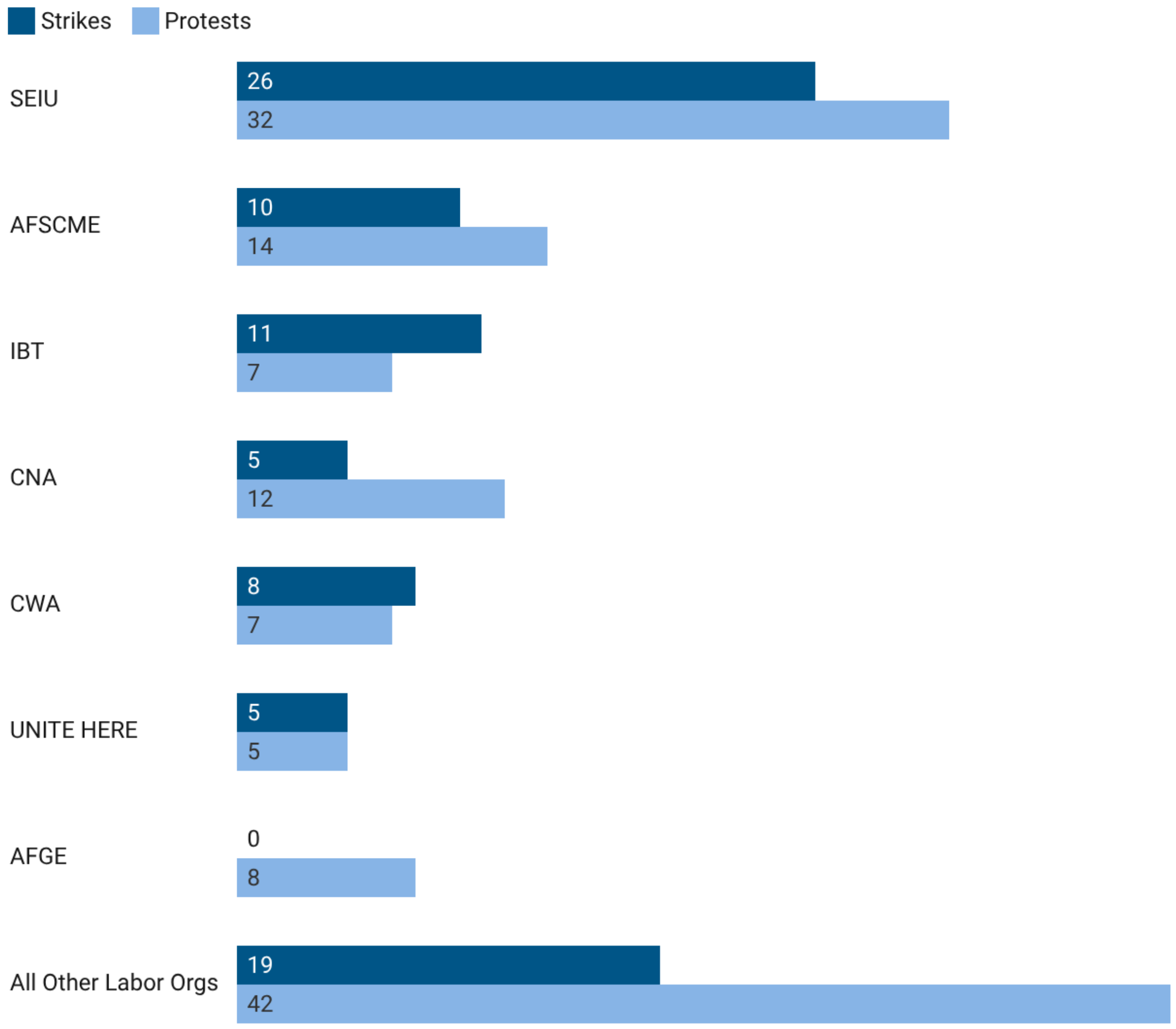
It should be noted that, while SEIU proportionally dropped, the union still had an incredibly busy year in 2025. Eighteen of the union's 26 recorded strikes were a part of its California Fast Food Workers initiative, an organizing drive seeking to take advantage of California's 2024 fast food worker law.[13] The union was also highly active in protesting federal immigration raids and in support of its public sector division. SEIU's Workers United division held at least two strikes at Starbucks in 2025, as well as several other protests in coordination with the national campaign.

Unions were not the only active organizations in 2025. As mentioned earlier, NDLON affiliates organized a series of direct actions protesting immigration raids, as did other workers centers in Los Angeles, including the Garment Worker Center (GWC) and the Coalition for Humane Immigrant Rights (CHIRLA). In Salinas and Watsonville on California's Central Coast, the *Centro Binacional Para El Desarrollo Indígena Oaxaqueña* (CBDIO), a worker center dedicated primarily to indigenous agricultural workers, notably pulled off a daring six-day strike in August against Eat Sweet Farms, a strawberry grower.[14]

All in all, many more labor organizations mobilized their members in 2025 than in the prior year. Federal policy shifts were behind many of these mobilizations, but not all of them. California unions and worker centers continued to be extremely active, bucking a national downturn in strike activity that took hold in 2025.

Figure 4.2 - Strikes and Protests by International Union, California, 2025

The figure below shows the number of 2025 strikes and protests in California, sorted by international union captured by the Labor Action Tracker. The upper bar shows strikes, and the lower bar shows protests.



SEIU = Service Employees International Union. AFSCME = American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. IBT = International Brotherhood of Teamsters. CNA = California Nurses Association. CWA = Communications Workers of America. AFGE = American Federation of Government Employees.

Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: Kallas, J., Iyer, D. K., & Friedman, E. (2025). "Labor Action Tracker." Cornell University ILR School & University of Illinois LER School

Union direct actions continued to be concentrated in select industries

While slightly more dispersed than in 2024, union direct actions continued to be concentrated in a few select areas of economic activity. The health care and food services sectors again registered the largest number of actions in 2025. Strikes in health care jumped from nine in 2024 to 21 in 2025, a major increase in worker activity. Action in the food services sector dropped substantially, probably driven by a decrease in activity at California Starbucks locations. It is unclear if this drop represents a change in strategy by the SEIU-affiliated Workers United, or a decrease in media attention to Starbucks actions after a lengthy organizing drive continues to languish in bargaining.

The public administration industry saw by far the largest jump in actions. While the number of strikes remained the same, protests in this sector jumped from four in 2024 to 17 in 2025. While this jump is largely driven by protests against the Trump administration's federal policies, many public administration protests also took place against local agencies across the state. Indeed, 10 of the 17 actions were aimed at local government employers, ranging in size from a large joint SEIU and International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) action against the City and County of San Francisco, to a small protest by the International Union of Operating Engineers (IUOE) against El Dorado County in Placerville.

The transportation and warehousing industry saw the biggest decrease in documented protest action between 2024 and 2025, in both direct actions and strikes. This may be due to a relative decrease in actions by the Teamsters in the Amazon campaign that were documented by the Labor Tracker in 2025.

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 shows the number of protests.

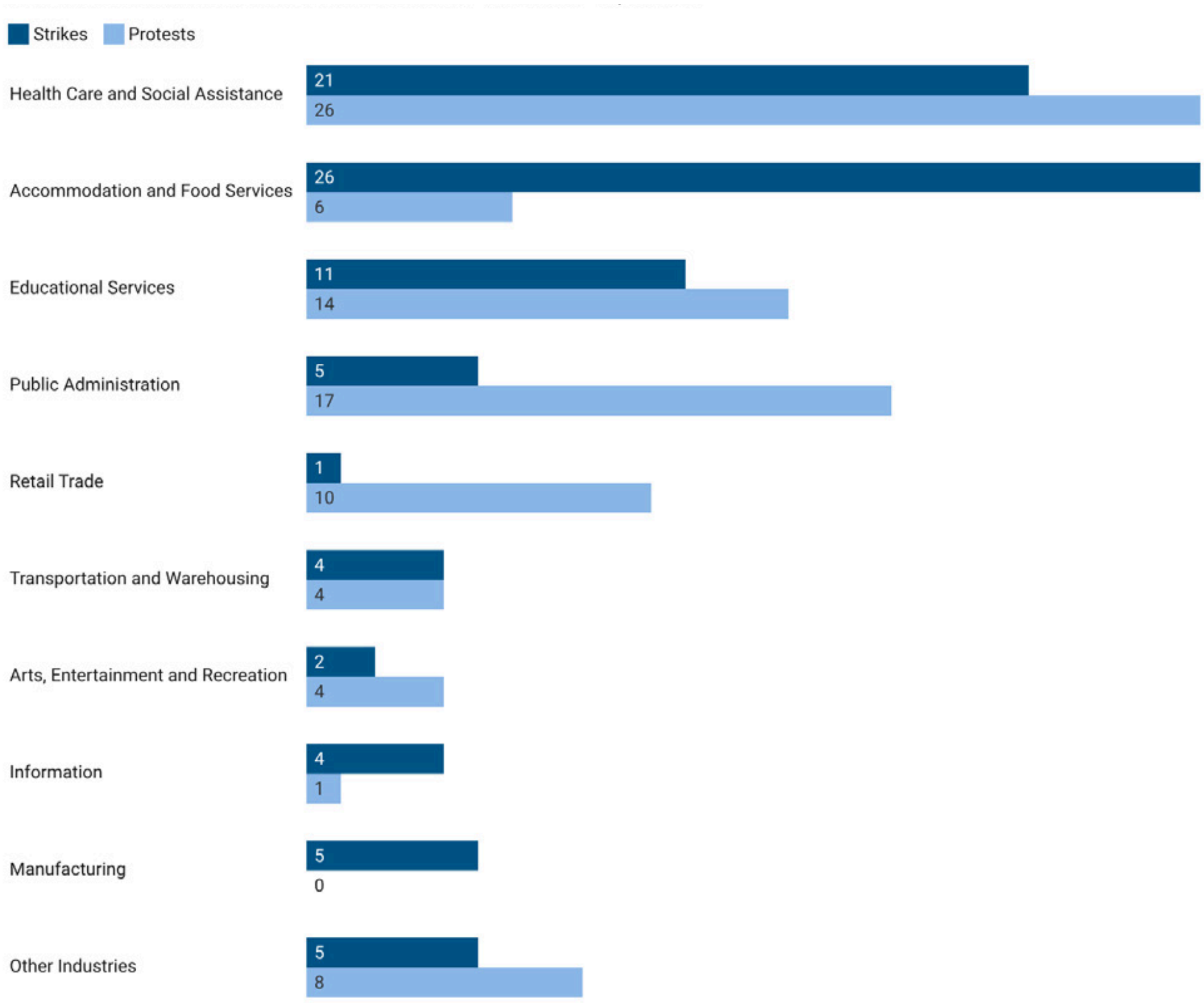


Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: Kallas, J., Iyer, D. K., & Friedman, E. (2025). "Labor Action Tracker." Cornell University ILR School & University of Illinois LER School

Conclusion

California unions had a busy year of protests in 2025, as Golden State union members joined the hundreds of thousands of other American citizens taking to the streets in record numbers. Worker action shifted away from the large quantity of strikes seen in recent years, with grievances extending beyond the workplace into the broader social and political climate. While some hallmark labor campaigns, like the SEIU Starbucks organizing drive and the Teamsters campaign at Amazon, had relatively quiet years, other efforts drove members of unions less likely to organize protests to engage in direct action, such as AFGE, the OCEA, and NALC. The total sum of actions and strikes exceeded 2024's already high levels and showed no sign of slowing by the end of the year.

Endnotes

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CHAPTER 5

Union Membership by Organization

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Justin McBride and Chris Zepeda-Millán

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 2025. The OLMS is a branch of the U.S. Department of Labor that oversees union governance and democracy. As a part of this oversight, every union local in the U.S. with members employed in either the private sector or the federal government must provide a report on its finances, including membership. See Appendix 2 for a note on the methods and a discussion of important limitations to OLMS data.

Overall, OMLS data for 2025 shows membership for California unions was essentially flat. Unions reported a 1.1% decrease over the course of the year—from 2,431,829 members in 2024 to 2,404,010 members in 2025. Due to the imprecise nature of OLMS data and conflicting evidence from the analysis in Chapter 1 of this report, such a small decrease represents little in the way of gain or loss for the labor movement as a whole. However, a closer look reveals larger fluctuations at specific organizations. Many unions reported modest or even substantial growth in 2025, while some unions reported modest losses over the course of the year.

Over half of California union members belong to four unions

California unions reported roughly 2.4 million members in 2025. The distribution between unions remains largely unchanged from 2024, though a few key differences emerged in the unions' collective self-reported data. Almost one in three of these members belonged to the state's largest union, and roughly an additional quarter of union members belonged to the next three largest unions combined. The 35 smallest unions included in this analysis represent one-fourth of the state's union membership.

Almost 30% of California's union members belonged to SEIU—708,461 in all, a 6.4% increase from 2024. The proportional amount increased by two percentage points from 2024 (from 27.3%). While such a small increase may be noise in the data, there is no doubt that SEIU continues to grow in California through organizing and other channels. As discussed in Appendix 2, this number is almost certainly an undercount. SEIU has at least three large locals

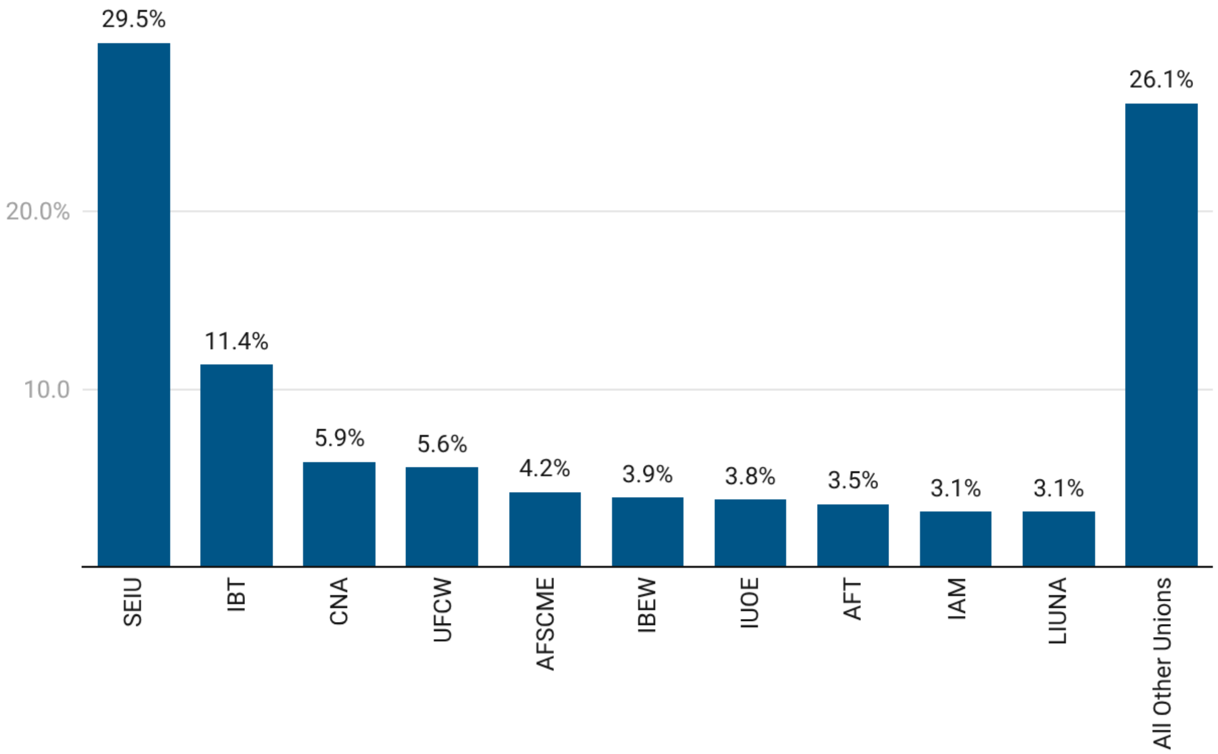
(SEIU 1000, CFA, and CSUEU) not included in this data that collectively have tens of thousands of additional members. Of the SEIU members accounted for in OLMS reporting, about 40% belonged to Local 2015. The second largest local in the country (after SEIU Local 1199, located in the northeast), SEIU Local 2015 represents primarily homecare and extended care workers. Other key locals include: United Healthcare Workers West (18.1% of California SEIU members), one of the more aggressive organizing locals in the state (see the Chapter on NLRB elections); SEIU Local 721 (12.3% of California SEIU members), which represents public sector workers across Southern California; SEIU Local 1021 (7.9% of California SEIU members), the parallel local for the Bay Area; United Service Workers West (6.9%), which represents janitors and private security guards; and SEIU Local 521 (5.3%), which represents public sector workers from San Jose to Bakersfield.

The remainder of the state's top ten unions by size did not vary from 2024, though the specific position of several of these organizations shifted. The Teamsters (IBT in the chart below, for International Brotherhood of Teamsters) increased their membership in 2025 and maintained their spot on the list. The California Nurses Association (CNA), AFSCME, the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), and the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) all proportionally increased in size, in each case due to increases in reported membership in 2025. Notably, AFSCME and AFT almost certainly have larger membership bases than the OLMS reports due to their representation of large quantities of public sector workers. The other unions in the top ten California labor organizations by size all reported lower membership levels at the end of 2025 than at the start of the year.

Perhaps most interestingly, the proportion of membership held in the smallest unions in the state dropped, from 29.2% to 26.1%. If this trend continues in future years, it may point to increasing consolidation of the California labor movement's powers into a select number of organizations.

Figure 5.1 - Union Membership by International Union, California, 2025

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 2,404,010. See Appendix 1 for a table with breakdowns by 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

Some California unions grew in 2025, while others reported lower membership

Myriad factors can go into whether a union reports higher or lower membership from year to year. Figure 5.2 shows changes in reported 2024 to 2025 membership by California unions with at least 1,000 members in the state at the end of 2025. The figure, however, does not explain why these changes occurred.

Of the 45 unions analyzed in this figure, 20 reported increases in membership and 25 reported decreases in membership. Fourteen of the organizations reported less than a 2% difference (either on the positive or negative side) between 2024 and 2025—essentially flat years given the imprecise nature of OLMS data. Indeed, the average reported change in membership across the 45 organizations was -0.8%.

The largest proportional increase in membership was reported by AFSCME, from 91,876 members in 2024 to 101,595 members in 2025. AFSCME was the only union to report over a 7% increase in 2025, at 10.6%. By stark contrast, in 2024 eight unions reported 7% or larger increases in membership from the prior year, evidence that 2025 was not a year for large union growth.

See Appendix 1 for a table with the reported membership and rate of change, aggregated by international union, for every California organization included in this analysis.

Figure 5.2 - Membership Change by International Union, California, 2024-2025 (over 1,000 members in-state)

This chart shows the percent change in membership for each aggregated international union with members in California between 2024 and 2025.

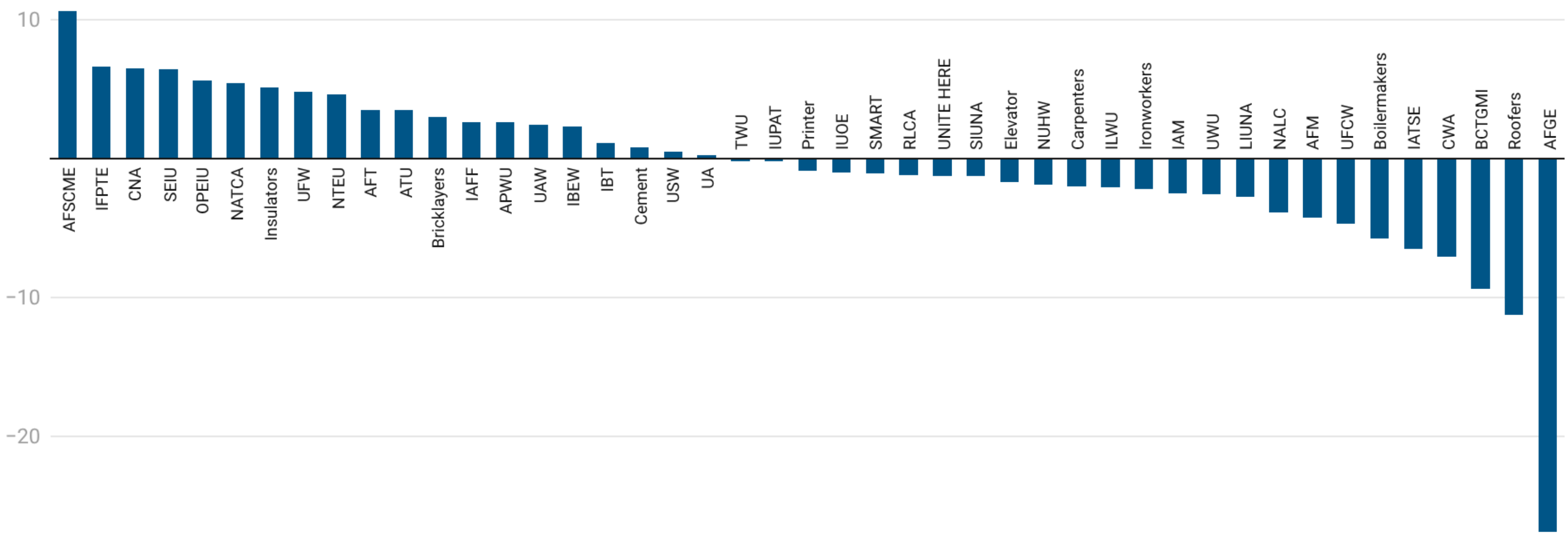


Chart: UCLA IRLE - Source: OLMS Online Public Disclosure Room

Union membership growth slowed in 2025 from the previous year

Twenty California unions reported increased membership during 2025, though the increases tended to be very modest. Only six of these unions reported more than 1,000 new members, and only one (SEIU) reported more than 10,000 new members. The bottom ten growing unions collectively reported under 1,000 new members. Because of the imprecise nature of OLMS membership reporting, this represents an essentially flat year for most California unions.

However, a few organizations were able to buck this trend. SEIU, last year's leader in growth, had an even larger increase in reported membership in 2025 than in 2024 (42,842 versus 35,477). These accounted for 58.0% of new reported net members statewide (compared to 41.9% in 2024). Most of these new members joined Local 2015 (about 29,000). But other SEIU locals also had good years for increasing membership. United Healthcare Workers West, one of the more active unions for private sector new organizing (see the chapter of this report on NLRB votes), increased its membership by almost 4,000 new members. And Local 99, the local which represents non-certified education workers in a number of Southern California school districts, reported that its membership increased by almost 7,500 workers in the open shop public sector.

Indeed, six of the top ten unions for membership increases largely serve public sector members, including SEIU, and therefore can increase their membership via external organizing or internal signing up of non-represented workers. The second-largest increase occurred at AFSCME, which also experienced the largest proportional increase for a labor organization in 2025. But other public sector unions like the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the International Association of Fire Fighters (IAFF), the American Postal Workers Union (APWU), and the National Treasury Employees Union (NTEU) all also reported increased membership. All of these unions operate in open shop environments, meaning new membership can come from internal organizing efforts as well as expansion.

Both the APWU and NTEU primarily represent federal government employees and had to navigate challenges in 2025 as the Trump administration sought to scale back union rights across the federal government.[1] Despite this, they each managed to post modest membership increases. The APWU notably also appeared in the top ten list for membership increases in 2024, perhaps pointing to a successful ongoing internal membership campaign, given overall cuts to United States Postal Service (USPS) staffing under the Trump administration.[2]

Figure 5.3 - Increases in Union Membership by International Union, California, 2024-2025

This table shows the reported increases in California union membership from 2024 to 2025, aggregated by international union. The second column shows the absolute number of new reported members between 2024 and 2025, and the final column shows what percent increase this represented for the union. The last row is an aggregation of the 10 other unions which reported increases in membership.

Union	New Members	Rate of Increase
SEIU	42,842	6.4%
AFSCME	9,719	10.6%
CNA	8,679	6.5%
IBT	2,966	1.1%
AFT	2,869	3.5%
IBEW	2,077	2.3%
IAFF	962	2.6%
OPEIU	854	5.6%
APWU	852	2.6%
NTEU	317	4.6%
Other Unions That Reported Increases	889	1.0%

CNA = California Nurses Association. IBT = Teamsters. AFT = Amer. Fed. of Teachers. IBEW = Electrical Workers. IAFF = Firefighters. OPEIU = Office & Professional Employees. APWU = American Postal Workers Union. NTEU = National Treasury Employees Union.

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

Some unions experienced membership challenges in 2025

Unions that reported lower membership in 2025 also reported, on average, larger decreases than the increases reported from unions that grew. For unions with reported decreased members, decrease rates were also on average much higher than in 2024.

Unions might report a lower membership from year to year for any number of reasons. Business closings or lay-offs would have an impact on union membership, while automation could limit new hiring to replace existing workers. 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.

That acknowledged, some California unions clearly faced substantial challenges in 2025 stemming from federal policy, bankruptcy of long-time signatories, or slowdowns of economic activity.

The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), the nation's largest public sector union for federal government workers, showed the starkest drop in California membership in 2025. This should come as little surprise, given the Trump administration's stated goal of eliminating public sector bargaining for federal workers entirely.[3] Nationwide, the federal workforce decreased by over 215,000 employees during the course of 2025,[4] many of them represented by AFGE. Trump also ordered unilateral suspensions of collective bargaining agreements for numerous federal agencies in 2025, including dozens of cabinet-level departments in March[5] and the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) in August.[6] While these moves have been challenged in court, the future of federal public sector collective bargaining is still in doubt in 2026. In this context, it is little surprise that AFGE reported substantially lower membership at the end of 2025.

The UFCW again reported lower membership in 2025 (the union also appeared in the top five for decreased membership in 2024). Some of these losses may be due to the closing of union signatory pharmacy Rite-Aid, which declared bankruptcy in 2025 and closed its last stores late in the year.[7] The UFCW represented workers at many Rite-Aid locations. The union is also facing increased automation of cashier jobs in its core signatory grocery stores.[8]

The International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE) also experienced a substantial drop in membership, like the UFCW, appearing on this list for the second year in a row. Film and television production in Los Angeles continued to decline in 2025 for the third consecutive year, this time by 24% from 2024 levels. This severe reduction in 2025 led the overall shoot days in L.A. to drop to near COVID-era levels of inactivity, and many observers predict the slowdown will only continue into 2026.[9]

Figure 5.4 - Decreases in Union Membership by International Union, California, 2024-2025

This table shows the values for California unions that reported decreases in membership from 2024-2025, aggregated by international union for those unions with over 1,000 members in-state. The second column shows the absolute number of reported decreases in members, and the final column shows the percent decrease this represented for the union. The last row is an aggregation of 20 other unions that reported a decrease in membership.

INTL	Change in Membership	Rate of Decrease
AFGE	−8,084	−26.9%
UFCW	−6,726	−4.7%
IATSE	−4,187	−6.5%
CWA	−2,926	−7.1%
LIUNA	−2,130	−2.8%
Other Unions That Reported Decreases	−9,954	−2.1%

AFGE = Government Employees. UFCW = Food & Commercial Workers. IATSE = Theatrical and Stage Employees. CWA = Communications Workers. LIUNA = Laborers.

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

Conclusion

The California labor movement clearly faced a more challenging environment in 2025 than the prior several years. Some unions were able to grow, but these were fairly limited in number, and increases in membership tended to be substantially smaller than in 2024. Despite a few positive cases, more unions reported fewer members at the close of 2025 than at its start than those that reported gains. Overall, unions reported only a modest loss, essentially marking a flatlined year for labor union membership in California and potentially pointing to increased consolidation of union membership in a few select organizations.

Appendix 1 - Union Membership by International Union Organization

Figure 5.5 - California Union Membership Aggregated by International Union, 2025

The table below shows union membership aggregated by international union. The third column of this table shows the reported 2025 membership for all California unions, aggregated by international union. The fourth column shows the absolute reported increase or decrease in membership between 2024 and 2025, and the fifth column shows the percent change in membership.

Abbreviation	Common Name or Description	2025 Membership	Increase or Decrease in Members, 2024 to 2025	Rate of Increase or Decrease
AAE	Educators	61	-9	-12.9%
AFGE	Federal Government Ees.	22,009	-8,084	-26.9%
AFM	Musicians	8,768	-394	-4.3%
AFSCME	State, County, and Municipal Ees.	101,595	9,719	10.6%
AFT	Teachers	83,974	2,869	3.5%
APWU	Postal Workers	34,088	852	2.6%
ATU	Amalgamated Transit Union	9,367	318	3.5%
BCTGM	Bakers	7,230	-753	-9.4%
BRS	Railroad Signalmen	446	63	16.4%
CNA	California Nurses Assn.	142,125	8,679	6.5%
CWA	Communication Workers	38,038	-2,926	-7.1%
IAFF	Firefighters	38,195	962	2.6%
IAHFIAW	Insulators	1,848	90	5.1%
IAM	Machinists	73,410	-1,878	-2.5%
IATSE	Intl. Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees	60,124	-4,187	-6.5%

Abbreviation	Common Name or Description	2025 Membership	Increase or Decrease in Members, 2024 to 2025	Rate of Increase or Decrease
IBB	Boilermakers	5,360	-330	-5.8%
IBEW	Electrical Workers	92,651	2,077	2.3%
IBT	Teamsters	274,566	2,966	1.1%
IFPTE	Engineers	9,044	558	6.6%
ILWU	Longshoremen	17,044	-374	-2.1%
IUBAC	Bricklayers	3,806	111	3.0%
IUEC	Elevator Constructors	1,323	-23	-1.7%
IUOE	Operating Engineers	91,941	-949	-1.0%
IUPAT	Painters	21,285	-36	-0.2%
IW	Ironworkers	18,556	-414	-2.2%
IWW	Wobblies	622	95	18.0%
LIUNA	Laborers	73,354	-2,130	-2.8%
NALC	Letter Carriers	33,459	-1,363	-3.9%
NATCA	Air Traffic Controllers	1,704	88	5.4%
NFOP	Frat. Order of Police	158	-36	-18.6%
NTEU	Treasury Ees. Union	7,236	317	4.6%
NUHW	Natl. Union of Healthcare Workers	18,752	-367	-1.9%
OPCMI	Cement Masons	11,373	86	0.8%
OPEIU	Office and Professional Ees.	16,068	854	5.6%
PPPWU	Printers	5,120	-48	-0.9%
RLCA	Rural Letter Carriers	3,208	-409	-1.2%
SEIU	Service Ees. Intl. Union	708,461	42,842	6.4%
SIUNA	Seafarers	2,004	-26	-1.3%
SMART	Sheetmetal Workers	23,228	-252	-1.1%
TWU	Transportation Workers Union	2,405	-4	-0.2%

Abbreviation	Common Name or Description	2025 Membership	Increase or Decrease in Members, 2024 to 2025	Rate of Increase or Decrease
UA	Plumbers and Pipefitters	39,494	96	0.2%
UAW	Autoworkers	2,647	61	2.4%
UBC	Carpenters	72,146	-1,441	-2.0%
UE	Union of Electrical Workers	953	-331	-25.8%
UFCW	Food and Commercial Workers	135,084	-6,726	-4.7%
UFW	Farmworkers	5,138	234	4.8%
UNITE HERE	Hotel and Restaurant Ees.	55,720	-715	-1.3%
USW	Steelworkers	22,537	86	0.4%
UUR	Roofers	3,205	-409	-11.3%
UWU	Utility Workers	5,284	-140	-2.6%
WPPW	Wood and Paper Workers	235	-53	-18.4%
Independent Unions		29,529	-277	-0.9%
AAE	Educators	61	-9	-12.9%
AFGE	Federal Government Ees.	22,009	-8,084	-26.9%
AFM	Musicians	8,768	-394	-4.3%
AFSCME	State, County, and Municipal Ees.	101,595	9,719	10.6%

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

Appendix 2 - Methodology and Data Sources

The OLMS is a branch of the federal government, housed in the U.S. Department of Labor (DOL) that 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 membership, 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."[10] Unions explicitly are not supposed to report "employees who make payments in lieu of dues" in this figure (i.e., workers they represent but who are not members of the union in open shop environments). 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.[11] 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 2024 and 2025. Note that these fiscal years may not align exactly with the 2025 calendar year, but every report does cover a 12-month period covering at least a portion of 2025. 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 2024 and 2025.

We then combined this data by international union, leaving us 57 total entries to analyze. For some analyses of proportional growth, we dropped those internationals that have under 1,000 members in California, 12 international unions in all. We instituted this cutoff to avoid proportionally large membership swings resulting from small absolute gains at relatively small unions.[12] The remaining 45 international unions range in size from SEIU on the higher end (with over 708,000 reported members) to the International Union of Elevator Constructors on the lower end (with about 1,300 members). An additional 85 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 gap in regulation excludes several large union locals, among them:

- American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME) Local 3299 (University of California (UC) employees);
- United Autoworkers (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 not included in the data.

Despite these issues, overall OLMS data can give a rough idea of the membership levels for most California unions. None of the above locals would likely drastically shift the size equation listed below, with the possible exception of the 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; Local 3299 and UDW are by far the largest locals of the union not included in a District Council in California.

Secondly, OLMS data does not disaggregate by physical location of the member in question. While most international unions are based on the East Coast, three 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), the Directors Guild of America (representing directors), 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.

Endnotes

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11. For example, should retirees who pay a special retiree rate count as a "member."
12. For example, the Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen reported increasing their membership from 383 in 2024 to 446 in 2025—a 16% increase, making them the fastest-growing union in the state as a proportion of their prior membership, despite an absolute gain of 60 new members.

CHAPTER 6

Behind the Magic: A Downtown Disney Starbucks Strike Reveals the Realities of Service Work

UC Irvine Labor Center
Iza Camarillo

Baristas strike outside the Downtown Disney Starbucks location. 2025. Anaheim, CA. / Photo courtesy of Starbucks Workers United.

The Red Cup Rebellion

As Starbucks workers across the United States mounted an unprecedented campaign to unionize the company's stores and secure a first collective bargaining agreement, baristas at the Downtown Disney location in Orange County sustained a 114-day unfair labor practice strike that became one of the campaign's most visible actions. Located within one of the country's busiest tourism and entertainment destinations, the strike drew sustained public attention, demonstrating how the location of a workplace can amplify the visibility and public resonance of labor organizing.

In 2021, Starbucks workers (called “baristas”) began organizing stores across the United States through Starbucks Workers United, launching one of the largest labor organizing campaigns in the modern service sector.[1] After workers won union elections at hundreds of stores nationwide, bargaining between Starbucks and union representatives formally began in 2024. Negotiations continued for months but increasingly stalled as disputes between Starbucks and union representatives intensified. In April 2025, union delegates rejected a proposed foundational framework package after concluding that the company’s economic proposals failed to meaningfully improve pay, guarantee sufficient hours, or address chronic understaffing concerns.[2] According to union representatives, Starbucks subsequently failed to advance new proposals responsive to workers’ core demands, contributing to growing frustration among unionized baristas.[3]

In November 2025, union baristas launched a nationwide unfair labor practice (ULP) strike on Red Cup Day, one of Starbucks’ highest-profile promotional events of the year.[4] Organized by Starbucks Workers United under the banner of the “Red Cup Rebellion,” the strike expanded over several weeks to include thousands of workers across hundreds of stores nationwide. Workers cited understaffing, stagnant wages, and unresolved labor disputes as central issues driving the escalation.[5]

The Downtown Disney Strike

One of the most visible actions of the Red Cup Rebellion campaign took place in Orange County at the Starbucks location in the Downtown Disney District. While the nationwide campaign involved rolling strike activity across multiple cities and stores, workers at the Downtown Disney location maintained a continuous ULP strike for 114 days, from November 8, 2025 through March 2, 2026. At the time of the strike, the store employed approximately 100 baristas and shift supervisors, with a strong majority participating in the work stoppage.[6]

Workers maintained daily picket lines outside the Downtown Disney location throughout the strike. They organized rotating schedules to sustain picket activity that frequently extended beyond twelve hours per day. Designated “Strike Captains” coordinated outreach, scheduling, and logistical responsibilities among participants.[7] In addition to picketing at Downtown Disney, workers participated in demonstrations across Orange County, including rallies outside Starbucks corporate offices and CEO Brian Niccol’s Newport Beach office.[8]

As the strike continued, workers were welcomed into community support networks to sustain the prolonged action. Participants described receiving mutual aid support from labor organizations, local churches, and community members, including groceries, meals, baby supplies, and strike kitchen support. Social media, interviews, and digital organizing efforts such as “No Contract, No Coffee” were also used to publicize the strike and connect the Downtown Disney action to the broader national campaign.[9]

At the same time, Starbucks Workers United representatives alleged interference during the action itself. Unfair labor practice charges were filed against both Starbucks and The Walt Disney Company, including allegations that Starbucks retaliated against workers for legally protected strike activity and that Disney security personnel attempted to restrict striker access to the Downtown Disney area where the store was located. According to workers, Disney later permitted access following the dispute, while some labor charges remained ongoing.[10]

Following the strike, workers returned to bargaining after presenting Starbucks with a revised contract proposal in February 2026. Negotiations resumed, though disputes over unresolved labor issues and previously negotiated tentative agreements continued.[11]

Strategic Ground

The Downtown Disney strike carried strategic significance because of its location within one of the country’s most recognizable tourism and entertainment hubs. Situated adjacent to Disneyland Park and Disney California Adventure Park, the Downtown Disney District receives constant foot traffic from tourists, locals, and workers.[12] Unlike labor disputes confined to warehouses or back-office facilities, the strike unfolded in a highly public-facing commercial environment built around customer experience and brand management. As a result, the labor conflict remained continuously visible to visitors throughout the strike.[13]

The visibility also shaped the dynamics of the action itself. Workers described receiving expressions of solidarity from park visitors, labor allies, and members of the public moving through the Downtown Disney corridor.[14] In industries built around hospitality and consumer branding, workplace disputes that unfold in highly visible public settings can generate symbolic leverage disproportionate to the size of an individual worksite. A single store may represent only a small fraction of company revenue while still carrying broader symbolic significance because the conflict unfolds directly in front of customers.[15]

Behind the Counter

The nationwide strike also reflected broader economic pressures shaping service work across Orange County. Although the region is frequently associated with tourism and affluence, many workers face high housing costs, long commutes, and persistent cost-of-living pressures.[16] Under these conditions, stagnant pay and understaffing can have significant consequences for worker stress, retention, and economic stability.

Workers at the Downtown Disney store identified understaffing as a central issue driving the strike. According to a Starbucks Workers United organizer, management-enforced weekly labor hour limits frequently resulted in stores with too few workers scheduled during peak demand, while employees were still expected to maintain speed, volume, and quality. The organizer explained: "[Starbucks] Corporate sets strict weekly hour caps for each store based on previous sales. Managers are expected to stay within those limits even when more staff is clearly needed. In some cases, they are incentivized not to use all the allotted hours because reducing labor can factor into their bonuses."[17]

When stores operate with insufficient staffing, operational strain is transferred directly onto frontline workers. Employees described irregular work schedules, intensified pace of work, delayed or skipped breaks, and pressure to continue operating with equipment that is not always fully repaired in order to maintain service.[18] At the same time, across industries, employers increasingly rely on performance systems that track order completion times, throughput, and other productivity metrics, reinforcing expectations of constant output without adequately accounting for fluctuations in staffing levels, demand, equipment failures, or workplace safety conditions.[19]

These pressures are not unique to Starbucks. Across the retail industry, staffing models are frequently calibrated to balance cost-efficiency with uninterrupted customer service demands and operational continuity. In high-volume environments, even small staffing reductions can intensify workload and increase pressure on frontline employees responsible for maintaining service standards.[20] Under these conditions, workers absorb the operational instability required to maintain quality service.

Still Brewing

Despite growing momentum, building durable worker power in service industries remains difficult. Employers continue to benefit from turnover, dispersed worksites, and uneven labor protection enforcement systems.[21] As the Starbucks campaign demonstrates, even when workers win union elections or sustain prolonged strike actions, securing contracts and improving day-to-day working conditions can remain an uphill battle.

The Downtown Disney strike drew sustained public attention to labor conditions inside one of the country's most visible consumer spaces. Yet long after the 114-day strike ended, negotiations and labor disputes remained unresolved, underscoring the gap that can persist between public visibility, worker mobilization, and lasting workplace change. Set against one of the country's most recognizable landmarks, workers compelled the public to confront the gap between premium consumer experiences and the working conditions that sustain them.

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CHAPTER 7

“Kaiser Don’t Deny My Patients Mental Health Care”: NUHW’s Southern California Strike at Kaiser Permanente

Inland Empire Labor & Community Center (IELCC) at UC Riverside
Marissa Brookes and Ellen Reese

NUHW members engage in a picket, 2025. / Photograph by Matthew Gilford, courtesy of the NUHW.

In 2024-25, mental health workers employed by Kaiser Permanente in Southern California and represented by the National Union of Healthcare Workers (NUHW) engaged in a 196-day strike, the longest-ever strike by US mental healthcare workers.[1] The following chapter discusses these workers' demands and strategy, then examines the successes of the campaign and their ongoing struggles for workers' rights, equity, mental health parity, and health care quality. Although NUHW won important gains for their members, they fell short of some goals, including achieving parity with their Northern California counterparts.

NUHW members' concerns

The NUHW represents over 19,000 social workers, technicians, mental health therapists, and registered nurses employed in hospitals, hospice centers, and skilled nursing facilities across California and Hawaii. The union has actively championed legislation to improve the quality of healthcare, patients' access to care, and equity among healthcare workers.[2]

Many NUHW members are employed at Kaiser, the largest non-profit healthcare organization in the United States, which provides healthcare to 12.6 million people nationally, including 9.5 million California residents. In 2024, Kaiser had a net income of $12 billion and $66 billion in reserves. In recent filings, its CEO received approximately $13.8 million in total compensation.[3]

In Southern California, the NUHW's Psych-Social chapter represents about 2,400 mental health workers, including psychologists, licensed social workers, psychiatric registered nurses, and substance use counselors, who are directly employed by Kaiser at its hospitals and clinics. These members are employed as far north as Bakersfield, as far south as San Diego, and as far east as Fontana and Riverside. Kaiser also relies on external behavioral health contractors.[4] Outsourcing, especially to non-union employers, tends to weaken union bargaining power.[5]

In contrast to their Northern Californian counterparts, where union density was higher and contracting out to external providers less prevalent,[6] Kaiser's Southern California mental healthcare workers received lower wages, and most lacked a pension. They also were greatly understaffed. Southern California Kaiser mental health departments had 40% fewer healthcare staff than their Northern California counterparts, leading to a lower staff-to-patient ratio of 1 per 3,000 patients (versus 1 to 2,000).[7] Complaints about Kaiser's behavioral health department in California, including its low staffing levels, led to a $200 million legal penalty and settlement agreement with the California Department of Managed Health Care requiring Kaiser to address the problems identified and ongoing federal investigations of its compliance with federal health care laws. Even so, 65 percent of Kaiser therapists surveyed by NUHW in August 2024 reported that their department lacked enough staff to provide appropriate and timely care to patients.[8] Moreover, compared to their counterparts in Northern California, mental health workers in Southern California had roughly half as much time for patient management time (PMT).[9] PMT entails a range of tasks, including but not limited to communicating with patients, developing and documenting treatment plans, completing safety checks and plans, submitting mandated reports, making referrals, and researching resources.[10] Striking workers noted how Kaiser's under-staffing contributed to avoidable patient harm; it reduced patients' access to individualized therapy, encouraged the use of artificial intelligence to triage patients, and contributed to poor follow-up with patients in crisis and premature discharges.[11]

An open-ended strike

NUHW began its contract negotiations for Kaiser's Southern California mental health workers on July 31, 2024. After three months, key demands remained unmet, including those for better wages, pensions, and PMT improvements. NUHW members thus authorized an open-ended strike, which began on October 21, 2024, and ended 196 days (nearly six and a half months) later.[12]

Along with regular picket lines, NUHW members organized 15 direct actions that increased media attention and pressure on Kaiser executives to meet their demands, including rallies and marches. They also engaged patients and other community allies in public demonstrations.[13] In April 2025, eight workers—the "Great Eight"—undertook a five-day hunger strike outside Kaiser's Los Angeles Medical Center.[14] The strike also drew sustained support from the Inland Empire Labor Council, which helped organize food drives, mobilize supporters, and engage labor unions.[15] Workers also drew support from public regulators and elected officials, including Fiona Ma (state treasurer and Board member of CalPERS and CalSTRS, both large purchasers of Kaiser health plans), increasing pressure on Kaiser to address concerns about access and quality of care.[16]

At a California Assembly Health Committee hearing on KP behavioral health services, workers, patients, and regulators testified, generating additional political pressure:[17]

"We fought hard for almost seven months to win a contract that improves patient care. It was a battle, but we never lost hope, and we never stopped pushing the envelope," explained NUHW steward and Fontana-based mental health clinician Jessica Rentz.[18]

The agreement ending the strike secured gains but fell short of key demands. Most notably, the contract increased PMT to five protected hours per week for full-time therapists, up from roughly two hours prior to the strike, but still below the seven hours provided to Kaiser's Northern California mental health workers.[19] The agreement also included wage increases but did not achieve full parity with Northern California workers. The persistence of longstanding North-South contract inequities among Kaiser's mental health workers was facilitated by differences in Kaiser's regional business structures and more extensive contracting out to external providers in Southern California. This weakened union density and bargaining power among mental health workers in Southern California, which had also historically lagged behind union density in Northern California, according to the union.[20] The 2025 contract agreement also included a cash balance pension, rather than a defined benefit pension. Moreover, staffing shortages and long wait times persisted.[21] Subsequent disputes over PMT implementation highlighted ongoing challenges.[22]

Conclusion

Although NUHW members' new contract improved their wages, PMT, and retirement benefits, they continued to confront "structural deficiencies in the mental health system," according to Anna-Melissa Chavez, a medical social worker at KP-Riverside and one of the hunger strikers. As Chavez explained, "These conditions underscore the ongoing need for sustained efforts towards structural and systemic change that eliminates mental health stigma, aligns mental health care standards with those applied to physical health care, and a fully integrated health care delivery system that is timely and equitable to all."[23] Alongside other unions, the NUHW continues to organize workers, pursue legislation, and advocate to improve the health care system.[24]

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CHAPTER 8

Going for Gold: The Fight for the Olympic Wage in Los Angeles

UCLA Labor Center
Elda Solomon Ugochukwu

Jovan Houston, an LAX worker and SEIU-USWW member leader, speaks at a September 9, 2025 press conference at Los Angeles City Hall after the Defend the Wage LA Coalition successfully defeated the airline and hotel industry's referendum petition, clearing the way for the Olympic Wage to take effect. / Photo courtesy of LAANE.

Background: Labor in the shadow of the Olympics

Beginning in 2022, tourism industry workers in Los Angeles, including airport and hotel workers, cooks, dishwashers, bellmen, and airline catering personnel, began organizing to raise the minimum wage. They argued that large corporations like airlines and hotels stand to profit enormously from the 2028 LA Summer Olympic and Paralympic Games while workers struggle to make ends meet in one of the most expensive cities in the country.

The Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy (LAANE), UNITE HERE Local 11, and SEIU-United Service Workers West (SEIU-USWW) anchor the Fair Games Coalition, a collective of over a hundred community-based organizations, unions, small businesses, congregations, and neighborhood councils. The beginning of the 2028 Games coincides with the expiration of a number of union contracts. Should demands go unmet, workers have indicated their readiness to strike. Such a work stoppage would pose significant risks to hotel accommodation logistics, corporate revenue, visitor experience, and the overall reputation of the Olympic Games globally.

In September 2024, the City of LA's Chief Legislative Analyst submitted a report to the LA City Council's Trade, Travel, and Tourism Committee presenting findings from an economic impact assessment of proposed amendments to the Olympic Wage Ordinance. The report found that the proposed wage increases would broadly benefit workers, the City, and neighboring economies, with the increase in worker purchasing power substantially outweighing costs to businesses.[1]

Organizing and advocacy: The fight for their fair share

The Olympic Wage Ordinance, passed in May 2025 by the City of Los Angeles, would incrementally raise wages for approximately 23,000 hotel and tourism workers ahead of the 2028 Olympics, creating the highest minimum wage standard in the United States. The ordinance was the culmination of years of organizing, coalition building, research, and policy advocacy efforts on the part of the Fair Games Coalition. The ordinance establishes a phased minimum wage increase for hotel workers at properties with 60 or more rooms and employees at Los Angeles International Airport, reaching $30 per hour by July 1, 2028. This date coincides with the start of the Summer Olympics. The schedule begins at $22.50 in July 2025, rising annually to $25.00 in 2026, $27.50 in 2027, and $30.00 in 2028, with subsequent annual adjustments for inflation starting in 2029. In addition to wage increases, the ordinance also raises employer-paid health benefit contributions and guidelines that expand compensation for workers who do not receive employer-sponsored health benefits.[2]

Immediately following this historic win, a multi-million-dollar referendum campaign to overturn the ordinance was launched and paid for by the LA Alliance for Tourism, Jobs, and Progress, a coalition of corporate actors including Delta Airlines, United Airlines, and the American Hotel and Lodging Association. The referendum petition needed 93,000 voter signatures to qualify the measure for the June 2026 ballot. In response, labor groups launched the Defend The Wage LA campaign to urge voters to not sign the petition, citing misinformation and various forms of gross misconduct.[3] This campaign was successful in mobilizing 115,000 Los Angeles voters to revoke their signatures on the referendum petition, driving public pressure for the City Clerk to invalidate the measure. These efforts were ultimately successful. The Interim City Clerk issued a Certification of Insufficiency on September 8, 2025, declaring that of the 140,774 signatures filed, 56,767 were not sufficient. The resulting total of signatures fell short of the 92,998 valid signatures required under City Charter Section 461(a), rendering the referendum petition insufficient and allowing the Olympic Wage Ordinance to take effect that same day.[4]

Just months after the referendum failed, City Council President Marqueece Harris-Dawson, who had previously voted for the wage, introduced a motion in December 2025 to slow the remaining increases, pushing the $30 target back to 2030, two years after the Olympics. In May 2026, the Council voted 9–6 to direct the city attorney to draft a delay ordinance,[5] driven in part by pressure from airline and hotel businesses threatening a ballot measure to repeal the city's business tax.[6] In a deal to avert a business-backed ballot measure that would have eliminated the city's gross receipts tax, its second-largest revenue source, the Council voted 11-4 on May 19, 2026, to delay the $30/hr Olympic Wage until January 2030,[7] with the business coalition agreeing to withdraw the measure in exchange.[8]

The fight for the Olympic Wage continues. In their protracted battle to increase LA’s minimum wage for hospitality workers, labor organizations continue to navigate a complex web of political reversals, corporate opposition, and competing economic pressures. Though the fight is not over, this ongoing campaign demonstrates the power of organizing, coalition-building, and community advocacy in securing workers’ economic futures.

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CHAPTER 9

Tribal Casino Workers and UNITE-HERE's Fight for Union Representation at Sky River Casino

UC Davis Labor and Community Center
Jason Whisler

Workers picket outside of Sky River Casino. 2025. Elk Grove, California. / Photo courtesy of UNITE HERE.

Background: California tribal casinos

A 1987 U.S. Supreme Court opinion, *California v. Cabazon Band of Mission Indians*,[1] introduced tribal casino gaming in California. The Court recognized tribes' sovereignty over economic development within their territories, including the establishment of casinos, which led to the expansion of tribal-run casinos in California and other states.[2] By 2022, the California casino industry had grown to a level exceeding the revenue of the Las Vegas Strip by 30%.[3] The most recent report by the California Nations Indian Gaming Association (CNIGA) indicated that in 2016 Tribal Casinos employed over 40,000 people statewide.[4] There are currently more than 70 tribal casinos in California that collectively employ tens of thousands of workers, but fewer than 20% of the facilities are currently unionized.[5]

The fight for representation at Sky River Casino

"I work in the marketplace at Sky River Casino," says Francisco Maldonado, "and I make $5.86 below average when compared to large union casinos in Northern California."[6] Francisco is among more than 650 workers who have been in a years-long battle for union recognition at Sky River Casino, outside Sacramento in Elk Grove, California. In 2022, he and other workers with similarly low wages began organizing with UNITE HERE Local 49. Soon after, Sky River workers sought union recognition under an earlier card-check agreement. Management refused, and in 2025 workers launched a public campaign calling on the casino to recognize the union and negotiate a fair contract.[7]

In 2017, while seeking a compact from the State of California to open the casino, the Wilton Rancheria Tribe signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with UNITE HERE Local 49. The Tribe promised to remain neutral in the union's organizing efforts at Sky River and to recognize the union if a majority of workers signed union cards. In exchange, the union agreed to support the Tribe's bid for a compact to open the casino and to publicly support the Tribe, both of which the union did.[8]

By 2021, UNITE HERE represented casino workers at four tribal casinos in the region, all owned by other tribes. Tribal casinos bring significant financial benefits and opportunities to the tribes involved;[9] Sky River Casino workers began demanding their share of those benefits. These workers began organizing a union when Wilton Rancheria opened Sky River Casino in 2022. Within 10 days, UNITE HERE secured majority support among the workforce, with over 400 workers signing union cards.[10] At other California casinos where workers have union contracts, the proprietor tribes have all honored card check agreements. At Sky River Casino, however, the Wilton Rancheria Tribe has refused to honor the card check agreement.

Wilton Rancheria has raised various objections to recognizing the union in arbitration and in court hearings, including invoking tribal sovereignty to negate the agreement and any potential enforcement mechanism.[11] The Tribe has also argued that its Tribal Labor Relations Ordinance (TLRO), enacted as part of a state compact under the Indian Gaming Regulatory Act, requires a secret ballot election. The Tribe claims that this requirement supersedes the earlier card check agreement. Arbitrators and judges at each stage, including the U.S. 9th Circuit Court of Appeals, have ruled in favor of the union—that the card check agreement is valid and must be honored, that the union has proven a majority, and that the casino must recognize and negotiate with the union.[12]

Despite repeated rulings in the union's favor, arbitrators and the courts have failed to enforce their rulings. The union continued to honor its side of the agreement, including publicly supporting the Tribe, but finally broke its silence in 2025. Along with the Sacramento Central Labor Council, workers organized the local labor community to show support for the casino workers. Hundreds of union members from across the region participated in union button and t-shirt visibility days at the casino. In November 2025, the union held a large rally and press conference near the Tribe's office building in Elk Grove, calling on the Tribe to recognize the workers' union. Workers like Francisco gave testimonies to draw attention to the casino's below-average wages. Community members spoke in support of the Sky River workers, UNITE HERE members from unionized casinos spoke out in solidarity, and local political leaders called on the Tribe to honor its agreement. Reverend Quintisha Davis Miles said she "expect(s) more from a corporation who is employing people to make them millions of dollars every month."[13]

Throughout this struggle, the union reports maintaining a strong majority support among the workers, whose resolve remains as strong as ever. Their public campaign has continued into 2026, including pickets in front of the casino in February and April, and remains unresolved at the time of publication.

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CHAPTER 10

Building Community-Labor Coalitions on the Central Coast: Resisting Budget Cuts, Layoffs, and Mass Deportations

UC Santa Barbara Community Labor Center
Ralph Armbruster-Sandoval

Immigrant rights and labor union advocates at Santa Barbara Board of Supervisors meeting. 2025. / Photo by Ingrid Bostrom, courtesy of *Santa Barbara Independent.* Permission Granted.

Community mobilization on California's Central Coast

The Trump administration's anti-immigrant and anti-labor policies came into full view on California's Central Coast (Ventura, Santa Barbara, and San Luis Obispo Counties) on July 10, 2025. That day, the United States Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) issued a press release "banning illegal aliens from accessing its taxpayer-funded programs."[1] HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. made this decision based on President Trump's so-called "Big Beautiful Bill" (HR 1) that was signed a week earlier, on July 4th. HR 1 included $75 billion for Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) over four years. In June 2025, ICE agents carried out mass deportations in Los Angeles' Downtown garment district, sparking intense protests and a massive, highly militarized response from the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), the National Guard, and U.S. Marines. In Carpinteria and Camarillo, ICE agents raided the Glass House Farm, detaining and deporting 350 immigrant workers on July 10.[2] During the raid, one worker named Jaime Alanis Garcia died after falling from a greenhouse roof.

The Glass House raid went viral, as ICE agents used pepper spray and tear gas to target community residents, as well as community-based organizations and labor unions, who resisted the mass roundup.[3] The Central Coast has a long and proud, although often overlooked, history of immigrant and labor activism that can be traced back to the early 1900s when Japanese and Mexican beet workers organized a multiracial union in Oxnard.[4] In the 1990s, Chicanx/Latinx high school and college students in all three counties organized protests and demonstrations to oppose Proposition 187, and during the first Trump administration, local organizations like the 805 Undocufund were founded in the aftermath of the devastating Thomas Fire and Montecito mudslides in January 2018.

Labor and immigrant coalition in action

The Glass House Raid deepened those preexisting ties between community-based and labor organizations, and when the Santa Barbara County Public Health Department Director Dr. Mouhanad Hammami announced in September 2025 that 7,500 undocumented health patients would effectively lose their benefits and that hundreds of unionized workers would lose their jobs, these groups quickly mobilized.[5] Under HR 1 and the new HHS policies, undocumented immigrants would no longer be able to obtain Medi-Cal and related services through federally qualified health centers (FQHCs). Patients classified as having "unsatisfactory immigrant status" (UIS) would be transferred, under Dr. Hammami's proposal, to CenCal, a nonprofit insurance company for all Medi-Cal recipients in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo Counties. Practically speaking, fewer patients meant that fewer unionized workers were necessary in the Public Health and Social Service Departments. Both divisions announced significant reductions, ranging from 55 in the former and 121 in the latter.[6]

Dr. Hammami made his decision on patient transfers based on credible fears that the Trump administration might cut additional funding for public health unless he complied with the new HHS policy. Preemptive obedience, however, made little sense to community-based and labor organizations who became incensed when they found out what Hammami had planned without consulting or collaborating with them. Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Locals 620 and 721, representing public health and social service department workers respectively, immediately responded, as did the 805 Undocufund and other labor and immigrant rights organizations. The UCSB Community Labor Center acted as a facilitator, bringing these groups into closer strategic coordination.

With the proposed patient transfers and job reductions slated to take effect on January 1, 2026, the community-labor coalition targeted the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors, particularly Chairperson Laura Capps. One of the board's most liberal members, Capps received strong support from SEIU Local 620 as well as from immigrant rights organizations. Gaining her support was, therefore, crucial, as she leaned on her fellow supervisors (including conservatives in Santa Maria, home to a significant Mexican and Indigenous farm worker community and wealthy agribusiness owners) to oppose the health care cuts and layoffs. The campaign gained even more visibility and momentum after immigrant rights and labor unions publicized the impending cuts on social media and mobilized their members.

During the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors meeting on October 7, 2025, nearly one hundred SEIU Local 620 and SEIU Local 721 members, along with numerous activists from immigrant rights and community–based groups, filled the room to strongly express their opposition to the health care cuts and layoffs. Many stated that the County was "prematurely complying" with the Trump administration and that "rule number one when dealing with fascists is not to pre-obey." Several weeks later, the board voted unanimously to delay making a decision for one month.[7]

During that time period, immigrant rights and labor groups connected with the California Immigrant Policy Center and National Health Law Program, which worked quickly to develop a legal policy brief outlining the HHS' illegal actions. California Attorney General Rob Bonta had sued the Trump Administration on July 21, 2025, along with 20 other state attorneys general, to block the HHS' policy shift on UIS patients. Bonta visited Santa Barbara for a Democratic Party fundraiser on October 19, 2025. During that meeting, immigrant rights and labor union representatives pressed him to talk with Supervisor Capps about the patient transfers, which he reportedly did, focusing on the legal injunction temporarily blocking that policy.[8] Several weeks later, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to indefinitely delay the cuts and layoffs.

Within two months, immigrant rights organizations and labor unions on the Central Coast secured a remarkable victory, moving local elected officials from fully supporting to fully opposing anti-immigrant and anti-union policies. What started out as a certain defeat quickly turned into a tangible win thanks in part to the deep history and legacy of community-labor coalitions on the Central Coast. While these ties wax and wane over time, depending on many factors, the UCSB Community Labor Center saw the health care cuts and layoffs as a strategic opportunity to strengthen those relationships. Moving forward, this coalition has been sustained, with SEIU Local 620 successfully resisting a new round of layoffs in the Public Health Department in June 2026. Community-labor coalitions in both cities are mobilizing, as they are across the nation. One can only hope, as was seen in Minneapolis with its rich legacy of activism, these efforts will be effective and stop these inhumane, authoritarian policies.

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CHAPTER 11

California Rideshare Drivers Organize to Raise Pay and Win a Greater Voice in the Industry

UC Berkeley Labor Center
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This case study was finalized prior to the August 7, 2026 California Public Employment Relations Board announcement that the California Gig Workers Union demonstrated support among 30% of active drivers, starting the 30-day waiting period before certification.

Rideshare drivers are among the lowest-paid workers in California—earning a median net wage of $7.12 per hour after expenses, far below the state minimum wage. Classified as independent contractors under Proposition 22, they currently have little market power to improve their pay or working conditions. Rideshare drivers around the state are organizing and have a new framework for sectoral unionization under AB 1340, signed in fall 2025.

In 2020, Uber, Lyft, and other gig companies spent more than $205 million to pass Proposition 22, exempting app-based drivers from AB 5[1] and locking them into independent contractor status.[2] Prop. 22 promised drivers flexibility and guaranteed earnings of 120% of the minimum wage—but only for "engaged time," that is, when a passenger is in the car or the driver is en route.[3]

Empty Promises

A 2024 UC Berkeley study of over 50,000 trips found that drivers' median net earnings were $7.12 per hour when unpaid wait time (about 30% of shift hours) and actual mileage costs were factored in—well below the California minimum wage.[4] Drivers have no say in how their wages are set. Gig companies use what legal scholar Veena Dubal calls "algorithmic wage discrimination"—exploiting historical trip data to determine the lowest pay a driver is likely to accept.[5]

Deactivation—being removed from the platform without warning or explanation—compounds drivers' precarity. In a recent survey, two-thirds of California drivers reported having been deactivated at some point, with many attributing these decisions to discriminatory ratings algorithms.[6] When drivers have sought to enforce even their limited rights under Prop. 22, state agencies have deflected responsibility. The Department of Industrial Relations says it lacks jurisdiction because drivers are not employees, and the Office of the Attorney General says it cannot adjudicate individual claims.[7]

A Creative Pathway

Gig workers and their allies challenged Prop. 22's constitutionality in court, but the California Supreme Court upheld most of the law in 2024, while striking down the provision that would have permanently barred unionization. That opening created space for legislative action.

AB 1340, the Transportation Network Company Drivers Labor Relations Act, signed into law in fall 2025, creates a state-supervised, sector-wide collective bargaining framework for rideshare drivers that went into effect on January 1, 2026. Under the law, the Public Employment Relations Board (PERB) administers an election process. When driver unions reach 10% of all active drivers in California's support, they gain access to a driver contact list; at 30%, an election is triggered; at 50%, a union is automatically certified. Any sectoral agreement must address deactivation appeals, pay transparency, and grievance procedures.[8]

A National Movement

AB 1340 is part of a broader wave of rideshare driver organizing around the country. In May 2026, 70,000 Massachusetts drivers became the first in the nation to have an officially recognized union,[9] after the state adopted a sectoral bargaining framework for rideshare drivers under a November 2024 ballot measure.[10]

In other parts of the country, organizing is occurring alongside policy experimentation won through efforts by app-based workers and their allies aimed at raising standards. Seattle's PayUp ordinance (2023) set minimum per-mile and per-minute pay floors for rideshare drivers, and the city's 2024 Driver Rights Ordinance extended deactivation appeal protections. Drivers in Minnesota and Illinois are pushing for analogous frameworks.[11] Across these jurisdictions, the common thread is the same: drivers are misclassified, underpaid, and lack mechanisms to challenge algorithmic control over their livelihoods.

Organizing the Workforce

Under AB 1340, up to 800,000 California rideshare drivers could gain collective bargaining rights—potentially the largest collective bargaining agreement in the state's history.[12] But the law only opens a door; workers must walk through it. Reaching even the 10% threshold will require organizing a dispersed, multilingual workforce with no common worksite.[13] On June 2, 2026, PERB determined that the California Gig Workers Union (CGWU) had demonstrated support from at least 10% of active transportation network company drivers, satisfying the threshold required under the new law to move forward in the unionization process. As a result, PERB authorized the next phase of organizing and directed covered transportation network companies, Uber and Lyft, to distribute a notice to drivers regarding the determination.[14]

For drivers, the stakes are concrete and urgent. For now, there is optimism among those who have been organizing this workforce. Rideshare Drivers United has called AB 1340 "a creative way to fight for better wages despite Prop. 22" that presents "a tremendous opportunity if drivers are ready to meet the moment powerfully."[15] According to SEIU California, the successful campaign in Massachusetts created momentum for California's work on crafting and passing AB 1340, given there is a lot of "heat on the ground" in this growing industry.

"A union potentially gives us the right to organize and bargain collectively, something we haven't had before. It's every driver for themselves as it is now," said rideshare driver Jason Munderloh.[16]

The ability to unionize "means being able to speak up and protect ourselves and our passengers without fear," according to another driver, Margarita Penaloza. "We're the ones out there every day. We're the ones that know what's really happening on the ground, and we should be a part of the decisions that impact our jobs and the people we are trusted to drive safely."[17]

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