

Upswing for labor movement?

Support for labor unions high even as membership declines

For unions, 2022 can be described as both the best of times and the worst of times.

The future seems bright—if you read the news headlines. Staffing shortages have given workers the leverage they need to attempt to unionize, such as in this past December, when Starbucks workers in Buffalo formed the company's first union in the United States in 40 years. And the public's approval of unions has reached its highest point since 1965, according to a Gallup poll in September, with 68 percent approval versus 28 percent disapproval.

The numbers have been steadily increasing since their low point in 2009 at 48 percent approval. The polling organization attributed the steady increase to near-unanimous approval by those who identify as Democrats; and with former President Donald Trump's appeal to many blue-collar workers, approximately 40 percent of Republicans have begun to support union issues.

Yet, at the same time, only 10.3 percent of workers belong to a union,

according to the U.S. Labor Department's Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), a drop from a year ago.

Amid the uncertainty, labor supporters hope that they're seeing an emboldened labor movement that will lead to an upswing in union organizing. And there is some evidence that this is starting to happen among the youngest workers: the percentage of workers ages 25-34 who are union members ticked up from 8.8 percent to 9.4 percent between 2019 and 2021.

"There are things happening now that we have not really seen in the labor movement in generations," Cedric de Leon, director of the Labor Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, said. "I really believe that we're on the verge of another upsurge."

What is going on?

Large organizing efforts

Seemingly everywhere one turns, there is an effort by workers to achieve what letter carriers and other organized workers have—a collective-

bargaining agreement guaranteeing wages and benefits as well as a place at the negotiating table.

In December, a Starbucks store in the Buffalo, NY area became the first of the coffee chain's U.S. locations to vote for a union since the 1980s. In a vote of 19-8, the baristas voted to join Workers United, an affiliate of the Service Employees International Union.

Some Buffalo baristas said that the company engaged in highly aggressive tactics, including flooding the restaurant with top executives, holding multiple meetings with employees and even bringing in ex-CEO Howard Schultz to talk to workers about current wages and benefits.

While the company engages in appeals with the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB), activists have spread the union push, with 54 stores in 19 states petitioning to hold a union election as of early February.

"It was a major victory," Brian Murray, a Starbucks barista in the Buffalo area and one of the organizers with Workers United, said. "I think our real fight will be now getting a first contract and hopefully having them recognize the right to organize, but with these wins I'm sure we'll see more workers organizing nationwide in the near future."

"Although it's a small number of workers, the result has huge symbolic importance," John Logan, director of labor and employment studies at San Francisco State University, said. Union advocates expect that the victories could gather momentum across retail shops and fast-food restaurants around the country.

Another high-profile organizing campaign is the repeat vote at an Amazon warehouse in Bessemer,



Buffalo-area Starbucks employees gather to learn the results of the organizing vote.

Right: The vote to organize the Alabama Amazon warehouse has drawn widespread support.

Below: The mailbox installed outside the Amazon warehouse became a focus of the decision to rerun the organizing vote.

AL. In the spring of 2021, warehouse workers held the first Amazon union vote in the United States in years, but they overwhelmingly voted against forming a union. However, the NLRB ruled that Amazon's anti-union campaign had tainted the results and ordered another vote.

During NLRB testimony, one warehouse employee said that during mandatory meetings at the facility, managers had warned them that the facility might close if the employees unionized.

But the biggest controversy was over a new mailbox in the warehouse's parking lot that Amazon said was installed by USPS to make voting "convenient, safe and private." However, Amazon officials placed a tent around the mailbox, even though USPS officials had told Amazon to not place anything physically on the mailbox. By placing the tent around the mailbox, Amazon obeyed the letter of USPS's rules but still created the appearance that the mailbox was not in a neutral location.

"The mailbox likely caused employees to believe that the Employer—not the Board—controlled the election process," NLRB Regional Director Lisa Henderson wrote in her ruling for a rerun of the Amazon union vote.

Amazon "used its considerable resources and undeniable influence to have a postal mailbox quickly installed on its property," Henderson said, adding that the move "essentially high-jacked" the voting process.

Additionally, though USPS officials testified that no one at Amazon was given keys to access the mailbox, a pro-union Amazon employee told the NLRB that he saw corporate security officers opening the mailbox.

The new election began in February, with almost 6,200 warehouse



workers eligible to vote. Results are expected in April. In the meantime, the NLRB has found that there is sufficient employee interest to hold a unionization vote at an Amazon facility in Staten Island, NY.

"The first election in Bessemer was very revealing of how the odds are stacked up against workers trying to organize in this country, and particularly in a place like Amazon," according to the Brookings Institution's Molly Kinder, whose research focuses on the present and future of work, especially for low-wage employees. "The big sort of takeaway from that first experience in Bessemer was, yes, there was a lot of attention and excitement, and this

thought that if this worked, it would be this massive victory for labor, and ultimately it wasn't successful.

"It sort of revealed the David versus Goliath nature of our labor laws," Kinder added. "We don't have an even playing field in this country for workers who are trying to organize."

It's not just major retailers that are seeing an increase in employees interested in unionizing. The problems with the supply chain from overseas have made the Port of Los Angeles a hotspot for worker issues. Truckers who work for XPO Logistics, a company formerly led by Postmaster General Louis DeJoy that operates at the port, are attempting to unionize. According to news

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reports, the truckers aim to combat low pay and long hours, and to gain greater more control over their schedules. They also want to be classified as employees and not as contractors.

Union advocates say that this situation affects the public, because the much-publicized supply chain delays could be improved by higher wages and better protections for existing workers.

They also contend that the pandemic, which has sparked interest from essential workers in having a say in their working conditions and pay, and which has resulted in a labor shortage, is creating favorable conditions for employees to unionize.

really consistent is the sentiment of the working people who are out there taking the risks...that they are absolutely fed up," AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler said late last year.

Thousands of workers went on strike in 2021. The employers or workers affected included Frito-Lay, Nabisco, Kellogg's, John Deere, Volvo, Frontier Communications, New York University, Columbia University, Harvard University, carpenters in the Pacific Northwest, various hospitals and airports as well as coal mines in Alabama. Meanwhile, workers at several fast-food and retail chains, including McDonald's, Walmart, Wendy's, Burger King, Bojangles, Jack in the Box and Family Dollar, held walkouts or short-term strikes.

Shuler said that the hardships of the pandemic, when many workers have been deemed essential and have been expected to work despite concerns about contagion, have made employees much more interested in having a say about their job and working conditions.

"When I was walking the line with those Nabisco workers and Kellogg's workers, I kept thinking about all of them in the plant, making Oreos and the Ritz crackers, while the rest of us were inside consuming those," Shuler said. "Those are the folks that really made the sacrifices and the whole time, they were told that they were essential. Then they go to the bargaining table, and they're basically disposable because the companies continued to profit through the pandemic and then say, 'Thanks, but we're not going to compensate you, we're not going to protect you, we're not going to value and reward you for making those sacrifices.' "

Several unions launched organizing efforts in 2021 in response to pandemic

working conditions while also pressing Congress and the Biden administration to do more to level the playing field for workers to unionize.

Union declines

While the headlines have sounded positive, they're not necessarily translating to improved numbers for union membership.

The number of wage and salary workers belonging to unions declined by nearly 241,000 in 2021, according to the BLS.

After rising to 10.8 percent in 2020, the overall union membership rate fell back in 2021 to 2019's 10.3 percent. And long term, the trend has been downward.

The percentage of workers belonging to a union in the United States peaked in 1954 at about 35 percent, more than triple the current figure. Back then, the labor movement consisted almost entirely of private-sector workers. At present, a microscopic one in 16 private-sector workers belongs to a union, with public-employee unions (such as NALC), now the dominant part of the labor movement. About 34 percent of public employees are in a union, as opposed to 6 percent of private employees. Of course, these figures understate the scope of the labor movement because many unions represent and bargain for non-union members, especially in right-to-work and in the public sector. NALC is a good example of this: While 92 percent of city carriers are NALC members, the union contract covers 100 percent of the craft.

Jennifer Klein, Yale University professor of labor history, told *The Postal Record* in 2020 that, "As private-sector unionism has declined, public-sector



'Fed up'

In addition to organizing drives, the end of 2021 saw workers quit at record rates, with worker strikes increasing at the same time. Workers are demanding higher wages, improved working conditions and benefits such as paid sick leave, and the ability to negotiate with their employers.

"I've been traveling a lot to picket lines all over the country in the last couple of months, been in so many different states and across all industries. But the one thing that's been

AFL-CIO President Liz Shuler stood in support of striking John Deere workers in November.



unions have become the bedrock of organized labor and have grown in importance throughout the late 20th century and into the early 21st century.”

Labor experts say that unions need to step up their organizing efforts if they are to halt the long-term declines. While high-profile victories at big names such as Starbucks help increase labor’s visibility, reversing many decades of union decline takes more than organizing store by store.

“You can’t really organize yourself out of that kind of hole on a workplace-by-workplace basis,” San Francisco State University’s Logan said. “To stand in the same place, unions have to be recruiting several hundred thousand new members per year” to keep up with jobs created in industries without unions and industries where unionized workers are dwindling.

Labor supporters hope that attitudes influenced by the pandemic and a supportive White House will help.

Biden has called for a “whole of government” approach to expanding the way the federal government can support workers. On April 26, he signed the Executive Order on Worker Organizing and Empowerment, which established a task force to “identify executive branch policies, practices, and programs that could be used, consistent with applicable law, to promote [the Biden administration]’s policy of support for worker power, worker organizing, and collective bargaining.” The order stated that the task force “also shall identify statutory, regulatory, or other changes that may be necessary to make policies, practices, and programs more effective means of supporting worker organizing and collective bargaining.”

Vice President Kamala Harris led the 24-member task force, with Labor Secretary Marty Walsh serving as vice chairman. In early February, the task force announced 70 recommendations to promote federal worker organizing and collective bargaining, which the Biden administration hopes can be a model for employees working for private companies.

The task force’s report called for several cabinet-level departments to eliminate barriers to union organizers being able to talk with employees on federal property, and a dozen agencies will establish preferences and requirements for federal grants that promote union jobs.

The task force also acknowledged that these changes are not enough to turn the tide, and it called on Congress to pass new legislation making it easier for workers to form unions.

Experts agree that the government needs to do more.

Alex Colvin, dean of Cornell University’s Industrial and Labor Relations School, called the divide between workers wanting unions yet not being able to join them “the representation gap.”

“The reality is we do not see workers who want representation being able to get it, and it’s really striking,” he said. “There’s nowhere [else] where you see such a big difference as you do in the United States in those numbers.

“What I think it says is that our current labor law system isn’t functioning effectively,” Colvin added.

Colvin says that it’s not enough to support those who want unions on social media or by attending rallies; the laws must be changed, such as through the PRO Act. The legislation, which has become bogged down in the Senate, would restore the right of workers to freely and fairly form a union and bargain together for changes in the workplace. And it would provide First Contract Arbitration to help new unions get started in collective bargaining—via the binding interest arbitration process that NALC has under the Postal Service’s governing statute.

Brooking’s Kinder agreed that the laws need to be changed.

“We’ve heard a lot in the news about stories like the Starbucks workers in Buffalo, or workers going on strike, or workers quitting, and so there’s been a lot of sorts of unrest and quitting and workers dissatisfied, but it hasn’t necessarily been harnessed into longer-term change through more union membership,” she said. “A lot of that is because of our labor laws.”

The hope is that as attitudes change, legislators will be persuaded to make the changes that will help workers organize.

“These are dark times,” Stuart Eimer, co-chairman of the Department of Sociology at Widener University, said. “But the future is open.” **PR**