

Unions Add Members As Jobs Return

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Sam Hananel, Associated Press

WASHINGTON (AP) — Union membership grew slightly last year, giving labor leaders hope that a period of steep declines has finally bottomed out.

The number of unionized workers increased by about 50,000 to nearly 14.8 million members in 2011, the Bureau of Labor Statistics reported Friday. The increase comes after unions lost nearly 1.4 million members over the previous two years.

Still, unions' share of the overall workforce fell, from 11.9 percent to 11.8 percent, as state and local governments trimmed thousands of jobs to address budget shortfalls. That's the lowest percentage of union workers since the Great Depression in the 1930s.

Unions saw losses of about 61,000 workers in government employment. But they grew by 110,000 workers in the private sector, mainly in construction and health care. Despite that growth, unions still represent just 6.9 percent of all workers at private companies, unchanged from 2010.

"The devastating losses from 2009 and 2010 have stopped and that's got to be good news for the labor movement," said John Schmitt, a senior economist with the Center for Economic and Policy Research in Washington.

Schmitt said another positive for unions is that private sector membership grew at about the same rate as overall job growth.

Union membership has declined steadily from its peak of about a third of all workers in the 1950s, and about 20 percent in 1983. The losses have been especially steep in private industry with the loss of manufacturing jobs that traditionally are heavily unionized.

"It is telling that as our country begins to recover the jobs lost during the Great Recession, good union jobs are beginning to come back," said AFL-CIO President Richard Trumka.

As private sector union membership eroded, labor leaders turned increasingly toward workers in state and local governments, where there was often less resistance to organizing. About 7.6 million employees in the public sector belonged to a union last year, compared with 7.2 million union workers in the private sector. And public-sector workers had a union membership rate of 37 percent, more than five times that of private-sector workers.

But future public sector growth in union membership is in doubt.

States and municipalities laid off tens of thousands of workers to balance their

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budgets after tax revenues plummeted because of the recession. Public sector unions also have faced growing hostility from GOP legislatures in Wisconsin, Ohio and other states that have tried to curb collective bargaining rights.

Florida saw the largest increase in union members last year, up 68,000, followed by Michigan, a 44,000 increase as auto industry employment surged. Union membership fell most sharply in New York, down 53,000.

New York remains the most heavily unionized state at 24 percent, while North Carolina has the lowest union rate at 2.9 percent.

Among full-time wage and salary workers, the median weekly earnings of union members was \$938, compared to \$729 for nonunion workers.

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