

The Delray Democrat

Oh, You Can't Scare Me, I'm Sticking with the Union"¹

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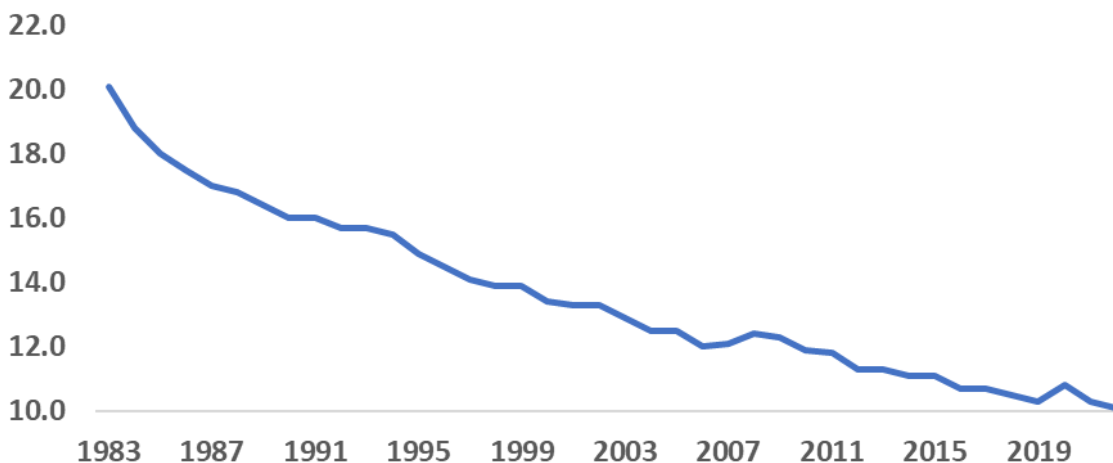
When Woody Guthrie wrote *Union Maid* in June 1940, more than 30% of American workers belonged to unions. The right to unionize was won only after a century of bloody battles in which workers were beaten by Pinkertons and thugs hired by factory owners.

In 1935, Congress passed the National Labor Relations Act ("NLRA"). Part of FDR's New Deal, it gave employees the right to form and join unions and required employers to bargain collectively with unions selected by a majority of the employees.

Unions helped create an American middle class that was the envy of the world. They reduced inequality because "they raised wages more for low- and middle-wage workers than for higher-wage workers, more for blue-collar than for white-collar workers, and more for workers who do not have a college degree. more for low- and middle-wage." They also benefitted non-union workers in the same and related industries by setting a benchmark for employers anxious to avoid unionization efforts.

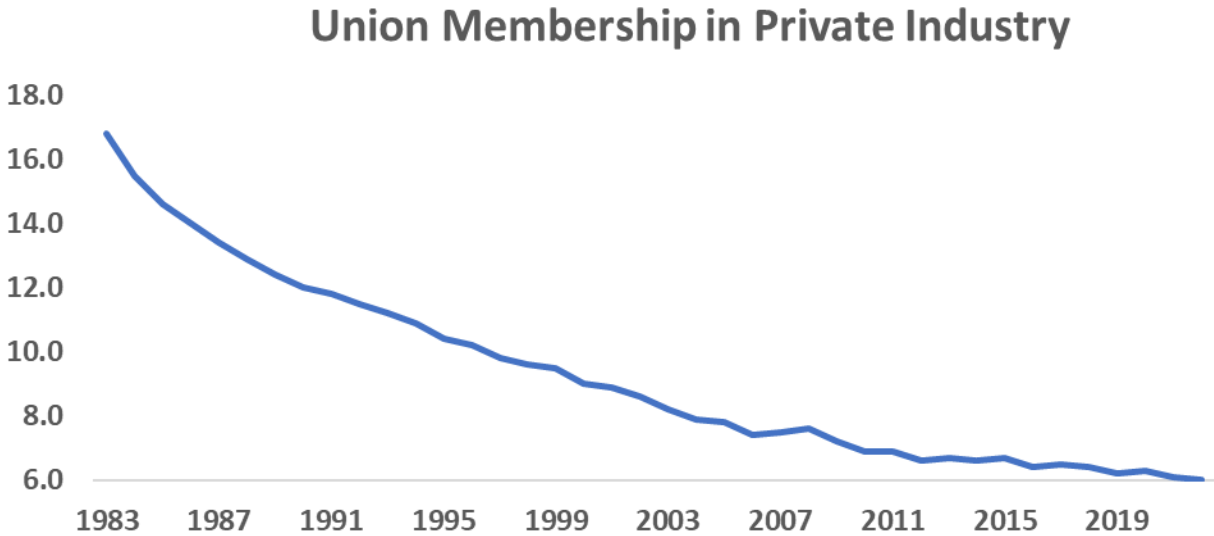
The converse is true as well. Union membership peaked in 1954 at 35 percent. By 1983 it had dropped to 20.1 percent and in 2022 it was 10.1 percent, according to data published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Union Membership: Private Plus Government

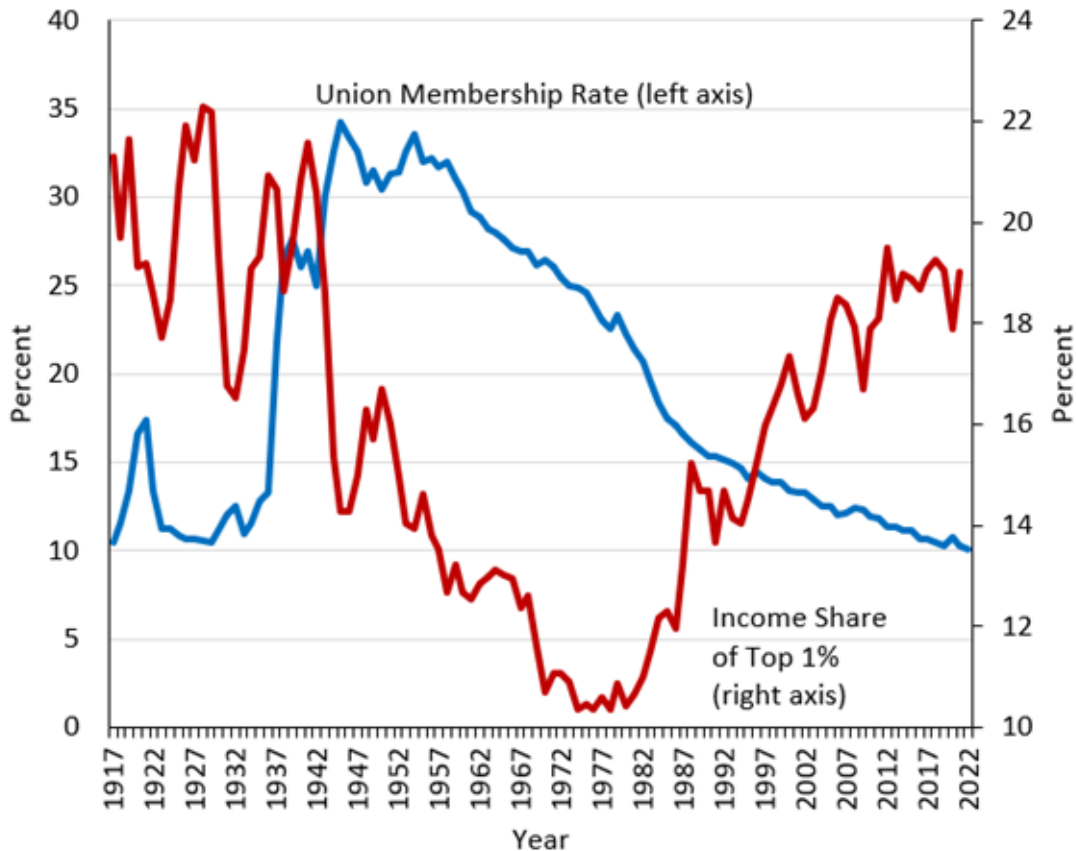


¹ [The Delray Democrat](#), September 2023, page 10.

Membership in private sector unions fell even more dramatically over that period, from 16.8 to 6.0 percent during the years between 1983 and 2022:



The inverse relationship between union membership and concentration of wealth at the [top](#) is evident in a chart included in a report recently issued by the Treasury Department. The tripling in union membership (blue line) that followed the creation of the NLRB was accompanied by a similar decline in the income share of the top 1 percent (red [line](#)).



How Did This Happen?

That's what George W. Bush asked his Treasury Secretary Hank Paulson after the Banksters crashed the economy in 2008. As Paulson later recalled in his [memoir](#), "It was a humbling question for someone from the financial sector to be asked – after all, we were the ones responsible."

What happened? Many factors were cited in symposium published by the [Institute for International Economics](#): increased competition, both domestic and international; additional members of workforce (white-collar, Southern, and women) less favorable to unions; deregulation of transportation industries; decline in pro-union attitudes among workers and increased resistance by employers to unions.

Resistance by employers seems to be the principal cause, aided and abetted by government hostility to unions, with the principal villain being the genial snake-oil salesman who became our fortieth president and quickly set about replacing FDR's New Deal with his own Raw Deal.

Overpaid CEOs were lionized as they cheated, squeezed, and discarded workers, many of whom continued to vote Republican because Reagan's racist tropes effectively misdirected their anger. Reagan stood on its head the philosophy that had taken America from the Great Depression to the Great Society: We are all in this together. Government became a dirty word while [greed](#) was celebrated.

The Good News: Unions Are on the Rebound

The [National Labor Relations Board](#) reports that the number of union representation elections increased nearly 60 percent in 2022. Moreover, a rule change recently promulgated by the NLRB will eliminate some of the dirty tricks companies employ to defeat unions.

Previously employers undermined unionization drives by firing organizers, delaying the election, bombarding employees with disinformation, and engaging in other illegal tactics. After they won the election, they were given slaps on the wrist. Under the new rule, such tactics are punished by the immediate recognition of the union.

As part of its Work and Education Survey, Gallup has been polling attitudes toward unions since 1936, and support for unions in 2022 was the highest since the mid-1960s.

In addition, the Center for American Progress reports that support for unions has reached a level not seen since the 1960s. Although support for unions is over 50% for all generation cohorts, the support increases with each subsequent generational cohort:

Gen Zers are the most supportive of unions, with a mean approval rating of 64.3, compared with 60.5 for Millennials, 57.8 for Gen Xers, and 57.2 for Baby Boomers.

Moreover, and perhaps contributing to this trend, each generation is increasingly diverse: "While 75.5 percent of Baby Boomers and 65.2 percent of Gen Xers are white, according to 2020 ANES data, only 59 percent of Millennials and 52.4 percent Gen Zers are white." The racists who chant "You will not replace us," are fighting a losing battle. Like them, I have spent my life in the

majority, but unlike them, I do look forward to being replaced.

[A recent report](#) from the Bureau of Labor Statistics highlights the benefits of union membership, citing the following data from September 2022:

- Union workers earn (salary + benefits) \$53.20 [per](#) hour (versus \$38.37 for non-union workers).
- Nearly all (96%) union members have access to health care coverage, versus only 64% for non-union workers.
- Union members have nearly six times (64% versus 11%) the access to guarantee to defined benefit plans, which guarantee a predictable income during retirement.