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Unionized workers in local governments seem to be receiving the highest wage premium amongst the sectors. Again, we caution readers as this could be a result of which municipal occupations are more likely to be unionized. Along gender lines, women benefit significantly from having a union, earning 15.8% more than their non-union counterparts. Looking at race and ethnicity, Hispanic workers benefit the most from having a union in their workplace, earning over 20% more than their non-union counterparts. Young workers also seem to be strongly benefitting from unionization in terms of wages, but these estimates should be read with caution as the sample size was below the threshold of 100. Looking more closely at a few industries and occupations, private sector construction workers make over 30% more with a union while service sector workers make nearly 20% more with a union. Education and health and protective service workers make over 16% more when they are unionized.

Taken together, we can see that despite declining union density in recent decades, union workers still earn more on average than their non-union counterparts. When workers have the ability to bargain collectively over wages, they tend to bring home a greater percentage of the value they produce with their labor.

## WORK STOPPAGES

From 2021’s Striketober, to the Hot Labor Summer of 2023, the past several years have witnessed a sharp uptick in work stoppages. In 2022 there were 434 strikes across the United States, up 52% over the previous year, involving 224,000 workers, up 60%, with the largest number occurring in accommodation and food services, educational services, and transportation and warehousing.<sup>iv</sup> About 31.1% of strikes were by nonunionized workers, but such strikes comprised only 3.1% of striking workers, signaling the grass-roots level of most union recognition strikes.

In New Jersey, there have been 26 total strikes since 2021, with at least 10 that involved 100 workers or more. Table 4 lists the largest strikes in terms of workers involved since 2021. The biggest recent strikes in the state have occurred in the last two years. The stoppage at Rutgers University in 2023 was the largest recent strike, involving 9,000 faculty, staff, and graduate workers, followed by the 2023 nurses strike at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital.

**Table 4. Largest NJ Work Stoppages, 2021-2024**

Employer	Year	Industry	No. Workers
Rutgers University	2023	Educational Services	9,000
Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital	2023	Health Care and Social Assistance	1,700
New Jersey Transit	2022	Transportation and Warehousing	500
Atlantic City Electric	2023	Utilities	400
St. Michael's Medical Center - Prime Healthcare	2022	Health Care and Social Assistance	350



Table 5 presents data on the longest strikes in New Jersey since 2021. By far, the strike at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital mentioned above was the longest recent strike in the state, lasting more than one-third of a year (134 days). The other next-longest strikes lasted just over one month, between 31 and 35 days.

**Table 5. Longest NJ Work Stoppages, 2021-2024**

Employer	Year	Industry	No. Days
Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital	2023	Health Care and Social Assistance	134
City of Camden	2023	Administrative and Support and Waste Management, Public Administration	35
Atlantic City Electric	2023	Utilities	31
St. Michael's Medical Center - Prime Healthcare	2022	Health Care and Social Assistance	31
Journal of Biogeography - John Wiley and Sons	2023	Information	31

As Tables 4 and 5 show, the New Jersey health care industry featured some of the longest and the largest strikes in recent history. The industry as a whole witnessed the second greatest number of strikes since 2021 (4), preceded only by transportation and warehousing (6), and following accommodation and food services (3). Importantly, half of the transportation and warehousing work stoppages (3) occurred at Amazon facilities in New Jersey, and all the strikes in accommodation and food services were among Starbucks baristas affiliated with Starbucks Workers United.

## CONCLUSION

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic we have been experiencing a resurgence of union activity and interest in unions by US workers. Beginning with health and safety concerns during the early days of the pandemic, followed by rising inflation during the recovery, local unions have been taking a more aggressive approach in contract negotiations, demanding larger wage increases, better scheduling practices, stronger safety measures, the end of two-tier benefits and pay schemes, and more. In many instances, as was the case with John Deere and Kellogg’s in the Fall of 2021, rank-and-file members have voted down tentative agreements, sending bargaining teams back to the table to demand more and winning 10% pay increases and \$8,500 ratification bonuses at John Deere and cost of living adjustments at Kellogg’s.

Workers involved in strikes in 2022 have cited the cycle of concessions during economic downturns followed by periods of relative prosperity in which nearly all the economic gains go to the top 10% — drawing a clear line between past concessions and the increased concentration of income at the top. Indeed, wages for nonsupervisory workers have been stagnant since the 1970s despite continual increases in worker productivity and soaring salaries of top executives. Thanks in part to a tight

labor market and the support of President Biden and the National Labor Relations Board, unionized workers have been pushing demands to reverse this trend. Absent a reserve pool of unemployed workers desperate to fill jobs, the threat of a strike is more powerful than it has been in recent memory. In fact, three times as many workers went on strike in 2022 than over the same period in 2021.<sup>7</sup>

But contract campaigns and strikes are only part of the story. The labor resurgence is also happening among non-unionized workers in industries and occupations that have historically lacked measurable union representation. Amazon warehouse workers, Starbucks baristas, Chipotle workers, Apple workers, Trader Joe's workers, and workers in over 600 other workplaces voted to form unions during the first six months of 2022—up 80% percent from the same period the previous year (Bloomberg Law 2022). This is no small feat given the lack of real punishment for anti-union employers that engage in hostile, and often illegal, anti-union activities, including firing workers for engaging in protected organizing activity.

In addition to new organizing drives and bold actions by existing unions, we have also witnessed an increase in demands by workers on issues that go beyond just wages. For example, one of the major sticking points in the 2022 negotiations between unions and railroad companies was work-life balance.<sup>8</sup> Teamsters at UPS are determined to have A/C installed in all trucks and to replace temporary and part-time jobs with full-time employment. Starbucks' baristas cite scheduling and staffing as major motivators for organizing. Teachers across the US, including in several Red States, have struck for increased educational funding and resources for students. Janitors with SEIU in Minneapolis even struck over concerns about climate change.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these important rays of light and glimmers of hope, union density continues to decline. Although labor added an historic 273,000 members last year, only 10.1% of US workers were unionized, down from 10.3% in 2021. These conflicting trends stem from the fact that the growth of the labor force overall last year outpaced the historic gains in union membership, leading to yet another year of declining union density. However, unlike nationally, in New Jersey new organizing in the private sector has increased the ranks of private-sector unions by 1%, but a nearly 2% decline in public-sector density has left total union density at nearly its pre-pandemic level. These patterns of labor union density are also reflective of the persistent challenges faced by workers seeking to organize in New Jersey and beyond. Nevertheless, enthusiasm for organized labor shows no signs of abating, which may continue to benefit organized labor in the near term.

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<sup>7</sup> ILR LER. (2024) *Labor Action Tracker*. <https://striketracker.ilr.cornell.edu/>

<sup>8</sup> Sainato, M. (2022, September 14). US railroad workers prepare for strikes as rail companies see record profits. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/sep/14/us-railroad-strike-union-pacific-bnsf>

<sup>9</sup> Altamirano, I., Nammacher, G., & Dalal-Whelan, P. (2020, April 30). Lessons from the First Union Climate Strike in the U.S. *Labor Notes*. <https://labornotes.org/2020/04/lessons-first-union-climate-strike-us>

## NOTES

- i. “Union density” denotes the proportion of all full-time, nonagricultural, wage and salary workers who are union members in a region, occupation, or industry. Data for the state rankings displayed in Figure 1 are from Hirsch and Macpherson, 2022.
- ii. The “2021-23” data discussed here and shown in the figures and tables throughout are the averages for the 36 months merged into one data set. All results are calculated for employed civilian wage and salary workers aged 16 and over. We followed the sample definition and weighting procedures described in Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson, *Union Membership and Earnings Data Book* (Washington D.C.: Bureau of National Affairs, 2018).
- iii. To ensure reliability, given the limitations of the CPS dataset, we have attempted to restrict unionization rates only for subgroups that have a minimum of 100 observations. Subgroups such as individual occupations and racial categories that fall below this threshold are combined into larger groups (e.g., “nonwhite” as opposed to black, Asian, etc.) to provide projections. In some cases, for subgroups that fall slightly below our reliability threshold, we have still reported these tabulations but indicated that they should be interpreted with caution as they may be derived from non-representative samples.
- iv. The work stoppage data discussed here and shown in tables in this section come from the Cornell University of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign School of Labor & Employment Relations (LER) Labor Action Tracker. While the US Department of Labor provides data on work stoppages, the Department only records strikes that involve more than 1,000 workers. The Labor Action Tracker records all strikes and provides, therefore, more comprehensive information on US work stoppages. Of the 26 strikes in New Jersey since 2021, 6 (23%) occurred in work sites both in New Jersey and work sites in at least one other state.

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