

## — News From The States —

# EVENING WRAP



By [Sean Scully](#)

It's Labor Day, 2023. If you were off of work today, we hope you enjoyed it. If you didn't get the day off, thanks for your labor on a day dedicated to all the people who do an honest day's work.

### The Big Takeaway

**Before we get to the latest States Newsroom labor coverage, let's have a look at some interesting statistics about the state of work in America, via the always interesting [USAFacts.org](#).**

- As of 2020, there were [132,174,000 American workers drawing a regular paycheck](#); that is to say people on salary or earning hourly wages. That's down a bit from the historic peak of 141,737,000 in 2019, but up from just 94,52,000 back in 1985.
- Of American workers, [just 10.1% were enrolled in unions as of 2022](#), down from 20.1% in 1983. There was an uptick in 2020 to 10.8%, but otherwise it's been a pretty steady downward trend.
- As of 2022, [about 1,091,000 workers were at or below the federal minimum wage](#), currently \$7.25 per hour. That's well below the modern peak – 7,824,000 in 1981, then \$3.35 – and well below the most recent spike of 4,361,000 in 2010, a year after the minimum wage reached \$7.25. In fact, 2022 had the fewest low-wage workers since at least 1980.
- As of 2018, [about 71% of workers in the U.S. had access to some kind of retirement plan](#), including pensions and defined-benefit plans like 401(k). That's the same as it was in 2009,

but in between the rate dropped to 68% for most of the early 2010s. The best coverage is for managerial and professional jobs, with 86% of workers having access to retirement. The worst is the service industry, where the rate has only broken 50% once in the last 15 years, and that was 2009, when it briefly hit 51%.

- In 2019, [median annual earnings for American workers hit a modern high, at \\$46,730](#). That's up from \$41,940 in 1995 and much better than the 20-year low of \$41,550 in 2012. Remember that "median" is not the same as "average." Instead, it means the midpoint, so half of all workers earned more and half earned less.
- In February 2020, [labor force participation was 63.4%](#), meaning the percentage of working-age adults who were able to work and had a job or were actively looking for one. That was the lowest point since 2015. It topped out in 2000 at 67.3%. But what's really interesting is what happened during 2020. By April, as the pandemic raged, the rate had plunged to 60.2% and by November of that year (the most recent data USAFacts has), it had rebounded a bit to 61.5%. The chart doesn't reflect it yet, but [the Federal Reserve's latest estimate](#) shows that labor force participation has still not approached pre-pandemic levels, just 62.6% in July of this year.

There's way too much fascinating stuff to detail it all today. If you're into charts and graphs, [check it out here](#). But don't blame me if you lose a bunch of valuable work hours as you drop down the data rabbit hole.



*Let's hear it for all you American Labor Force Participators.  
(Photo by John Moore/Getty Images)*

**Now, let's see what our newsrooms have had to say recently about the state of labor, both organized and otherwise, across States Newsroom.**

**It has been said that labor unions are having something of a moment in 2023, after decades of decline.** The head of the powerful AFL-CIO is certainly feeling the momentum.

Liz Shuler, president of the country's largest labor organization, was clearly in an upbeat mood as she addressed the first ever "State of the Unions" event in Washington, D.C., last week, [our D.C. Bureau reports](#).

"What's different about this Labor Day is the awakening happening all across this country," Shuler said. "It's up in Detroit, where just a few days ago, 97% of our (United Auto Workers) members said they were ready to walk off the job and push back against the Big Three."

Auto workers in Detroit [voted](#) Aug. 25 to authorize a strike if a deal with Ford, General Motors and Stellantis is not reached before their contract expires Sept. 14, the bureau writes.



Despite a concerted effort by conservatives to limit union power, including “right to work” laws in many states and a Supreme Court decision limiting the ability to collect dues from workers, unions are stronger than they have been in years, labor leaders said.

A recent union-commissioned poll found 91% of Democratic respondents and 52% of Republicans approved of unions, with even higher numbers supporting the right to strike.

So far this year, Shuler said, there have been 200 strikes involving about 320,000 workers, 10 times the number of striking workers than just two years ago.

Shuler vowed to build on the recent wave of labor activism and make organized labor a force in elections.

“We will not be silent while extremist politicians attack our rights: Our right to vote and have our votes counted, our right to read the books we want to read, our right to think and speak freely on or off the job,” she said. “We will show up and organize and vote.”



*United Auto Workers members, possibly feeling the momentum.*

*(UAW | Courtesy photo)*

**Teachers strikes tend to get a lot of attention, if for no other reason than they affect so many people,** kids and parents alike, and send ripples through other parts of the economy.

**In Washington, a strike that started in a small southwestern school district earlier in August spread to a neighboring district last week,** meaning about 30,000 students were affected between the two, [the Washington State Standard reports](#).

In addition to the usual point of conflict – wages – these strikes center on issues such as professional training and staffing for special education students.

“It always seems like they say, ‘oh, you have money from this government, that government.’ And we don’t always see it,” said Jennifer Cunningham, a special education teacher and former paraeducator at Evergreen Public Schools, the larger of the two districts. “I had a teacher just this past year who had to fight to get an interpreter for a deaf student. Why would you even have to fight that?”

Like their colleagues in other types of unions, the Washington teachers say they feel like something is different this year. Evergreen special education teacher Angie Latang said this strike is clearly different than the last time they walked out, in 2018.

“The energy is higher,” Latange said. “Last time, it was more...salary-based. This time, it’s absolutely not about salary. It’s about what our students deserve and what they’re not getting.”





*Evergreen Public Schools teachers in Vancouver on strike, Wednesday, Aug. 30.  
(Evergreen Education Association)*

In Nevada, meanwhile, pressure is growing on the new Republican governor to facilitate talks to head off a strike in the state's largest school system, Clark County, [the Nevada Current reports](#). It's not clear, however, whether he has the legal authority to do anything other than act as a go-between or encourage one side or the other to cut a deal.

Gov. Joe Lombardo has so far said he is "disappointed" that the district and its 18,000 teachers and other professionals can't come to an agreement. But he promised to help.

"While I've always believed collective bargaining should be handled at the local level, I'm eager to help resolve this conflict in a way that best serves the children of Clark County," he said.

A strike in Clark County would be a very big deal for Nevada, since the schools there educate more than 315,000 students, almost three-quarters of all students in the state.

At issue is how the district is using money from a \$250 million matching fund program passed by



the legislature, designed to provide raises for educators and other certified professionals employed by the state's 17 school districts.

The union, and many legislators, say the money is meant to fund permanent salary increases. The Clark County district disagrees, saying it cannot make the raises permanent since the state funding is not guaranteed past the current two-year budget cycle.

Legislative leaders have been lining up with the union.

Clark County School District administrators "shouldn't need anyone else to handhold them through doing their jobs, but it appears the administration cares more about scoring points against the union than they do about settling a fair contract for teachers," Senate Majority Leader Nicole Cannizzaro, a Democrat, said in a recent statement. "The law is clear, the legislative intent is clear, and it's time for the excuses to stop. The Legislature allocated money for teacher and staff raises, and we expect teachers and staff to see substantial raises."



*Down by the station, early in the morning, see the union drivers all calling for a strike.  
(Fran Baltzer for New Jersey Monitor)*

**In New Jersey, NJ Transit’s locomotive engineers were on the job today despite a unanimous vote last week to authorize a strike, [the New Jersey Monitor reports](#).**

Engineers complain that the transportation agency’s latest contract offer contains wages that are uncompetitive with similar contracts in other states. They also say the agency doesn’t adequately compensate for the stress and rigorous training requirements inherent in the job.

But despite the vote, it may be a long time before any work action can begin. The agency and union are currently in talks supervised by the federal National Mediation Board. As long as that process is going on, engineers can’t strike.

“We are still actively engaged in mediation with the union and a strike is not permissible while mediation is ongoing — that would be a violation of the Railway Labor Act,” said Jim Smith, an agency spokesperson.

Union officials warned that the agency shouldn’t look to the technicalities of federal law to avoid acting on their demands.

“We would prefer to reach a voluntary settlement, but make no mistake — with this vote, the clock is now ticking,” Eddie Hall, president of the national Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen, said. “The process to be granted release from the NMB has begun. As soon as it is lawful for us to act, we will.”

**More from the Labor News on Labor Day file:** [Employers, KCTCS team up to help Kentucky workers pursue education](#) ... [\(Arizona\) Business leaders: Solution to dire worker shortage is immigration reform](#) ... [\(Nevada\) Wage theft alleged against company contracted to clean Strip resorts](#) ... [\(Connecticut\) Upset with contract offer, Yale police union hands out ‘fear-mongering’ flyers](#) ... [\(North Carolina\) Duke Ph.D. students vote to unionize, bargain collectively with university](#) ... [\(New York\) A Hands-Off Labor Department Retreats From Wage Theft Enforcement](#) ... [\(Minnesota\) Allina primary care doctors launch historic effort to unionize more than 550 clinicians](#)



## From The Newsrooms

- [\(Ohio\) Report: CEOs who pay poorly do fabulously](#)



- [\(Minnesota\) Workers see big raise after condo board hires unionized management firm](#)
- [Gov. Pillen assembles a group to help solve Nebraska's workforce shortage](#)
- [Alaska appeals to U.S. Supreme Court in four-year-old union dues dispute](#)
- [Washington treasurer joins call for FTC to oppose supermarket merger](#)



## One Last Thing

**Labor Day was first celebrated on Sept. 5, 1882, in New York City, led by the Central Labor Union, [according to the official history by the U.S. Department of Labor](#).** By just over a decade later, 23 more states had adopted the pro-worker holiday.

Whose exact idea this was is in dispute. The only thing that the two sides agree on is that the originator was some guy named McGuire (or maybe that was Maguire).

“Some records show that in 1882, Peter J. McGuire, general secretary of the Brotherhood of Carpenters and Joiners and a co-founder of the American Federation of Labor, suggested setting aside a day for a ‘general holiday for the laboring classes’ to honor those ‘who from rude nature have delved and carved all the grandeur we behold,’” the DOL writes.

But, according to the official history, recent research “seems to support the contention that Matthew Maguire, later the secretary of Local 344 of the International Association of Machinists in Paterson, New Jersey, proposed the holiday in 1882 while serving as secretary of the Central Labor Union in New York.”

Either way, the DOL writes, “on June 28, 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed a law making the first Monday in September of each year a national holiday.”



*Workers from Advance Bag Company march in the Labor Day parade in Middletown, Ohio, circa 1918.  
(National Archives, American Unofficial Collection of World War I Photographs)*

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