



MASS MISREPRESENTATION:

MAINSTREAM MEDIA'S DISTORTION OF THE
STATE OF AMERICA'S LABOR UNIONS

Maddie Dermon, Director of Communications
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Though memories of historic strikes that liberated children from the grueling conditions of Industrial Revolution-era steel mills and coal mines have yet to fade from the American psyche, modern labor unions in the United States bear little resemblance to their forerunners.

Troublingly, corruption and polarizing ideological activism have commandeered Big Labor's priorities, bringing union membership to just 10 percent of the American workforce – the lowest in United States history.¹

Nonetheless, Big Labor's insistence that it enjoys “record public support” and “unprecedented activism” as proof that the “state of the unions is strong” has been embraced by the mainstream media, whose bias towards organized labor has, no doubt, led many Americans to assume the ambitions of today's unions are just as noble as those of days past.

To bring light to the media's misrepresentation of the American labor movement, the following will discuss the joint narrative built by Big Labor and the mainstream news media, plus an in-depth look at the true state of the unions in both private and public sectors.

Big Labor's Biggest Cheerleader

The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO), founded in 1886 as an “umbrella organization for unions of skilled craft workers,”² now oversees a federation of 60 American and international labor unions, representing more than 12.5 million workers across the nation.³

Organized labor, according to the AFL-CIO, makes “things better for everyone.” The reward of union membership, AFL-CIO guarantees, include a \$191 weekly pay bump compared to non-union counterparts; better benefits by way of employer-sponsored pensions and healthcare; a safe workplace free from death, illness, and injury; and a voice on the job free from fear of retaliation.⁴

The media agrees. Following a decades-long decline of labor reporting, unions have returned to the regular spotlight in several major publications.⁵ It's no coincidence that the resurgence of the labor beat coincides with a wave of unionization efforts throughout American newsrooms. Presumably, unionized journalists are inclined to portray Big Labor in a positive light. Today, the

¹ Sean P. Redmond, “Union Membership Reaches Record Low in 2023,” U.S. Chamber of Commerce, March 8, 2024.

² “American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO),” The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute.

³ “About Us: AFL-CIO,” AFL-CIO.

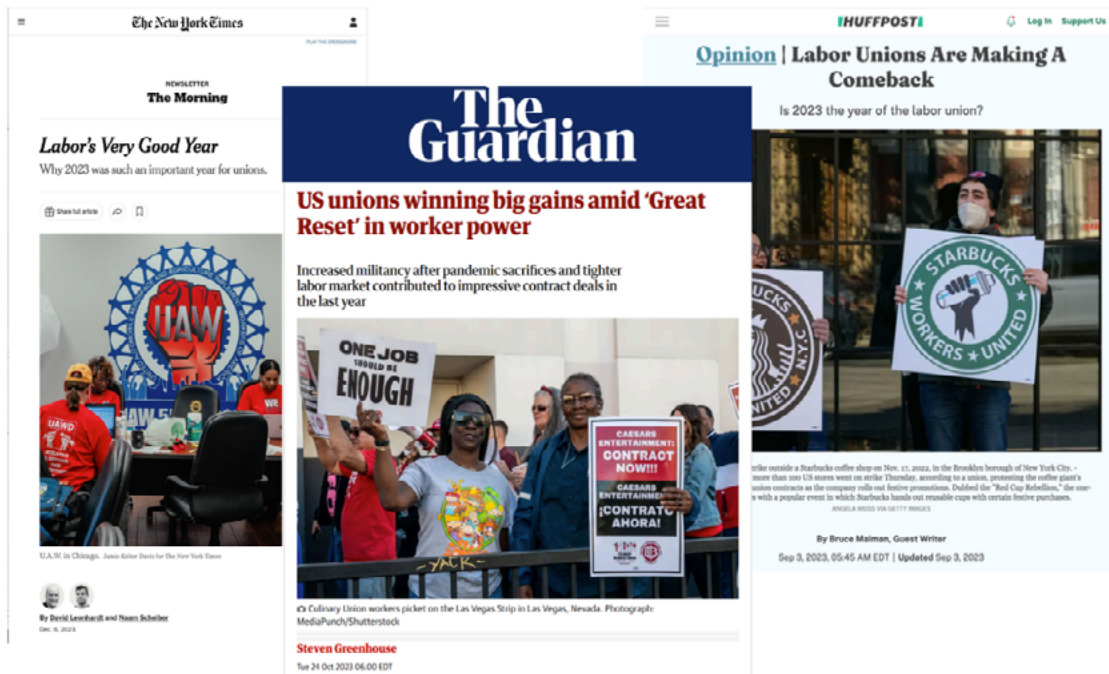
⁴ “What Unions Do: AFL-CIO,” AFL-CIO.

⁵ Thomas A. Kochan, Peter B. Doeringer, Paul A. McCormick, and Anna R. Gibbons, “Report on Worker Organizing Landscape in US,” MIT Sloan School of Management, June 2022.

now one-in-six⁶ American journalists who pay union dues are “more knowledgeable and sympathetic to labor issues.”⁷

Beyond recent labor reporting centering around hot button events such as organization efforts at Starbucks and Amazon amid 2023’s “hot labor summer,”⁸ coverage of unions falls into several habitual categories.

The first insists on the labor movement’s “recent renaissance in the American zeitgeist:”⁹



Despite “declining membership while falling out of favor with the public,” *Huffington Post* contributor Bruce Maiman wrote, “the state of the unions is getting stronger.”¹⁰ Additional installments from *The New York Times*¹¹ and *The Guardian*¹² echo a similar sentiment, including brief acknowledgement of Big Labor’s decline yet emphasizing unions’ resurgent strength.

Others stress the purported benefits of organized labor to not only workers, but also America’s economic and societal prosperity:

⁶ Jacob Liedke, “About One-in-Six U.S. Journalists at News Outlets Are Part of a Union; Many More Would Join One If They Could,” Pew Research Center, August 4, 2022.

⁷ Ben Smith, “Why the Media Loves Labor Now,” *The New York Times*, November 8, 2021.

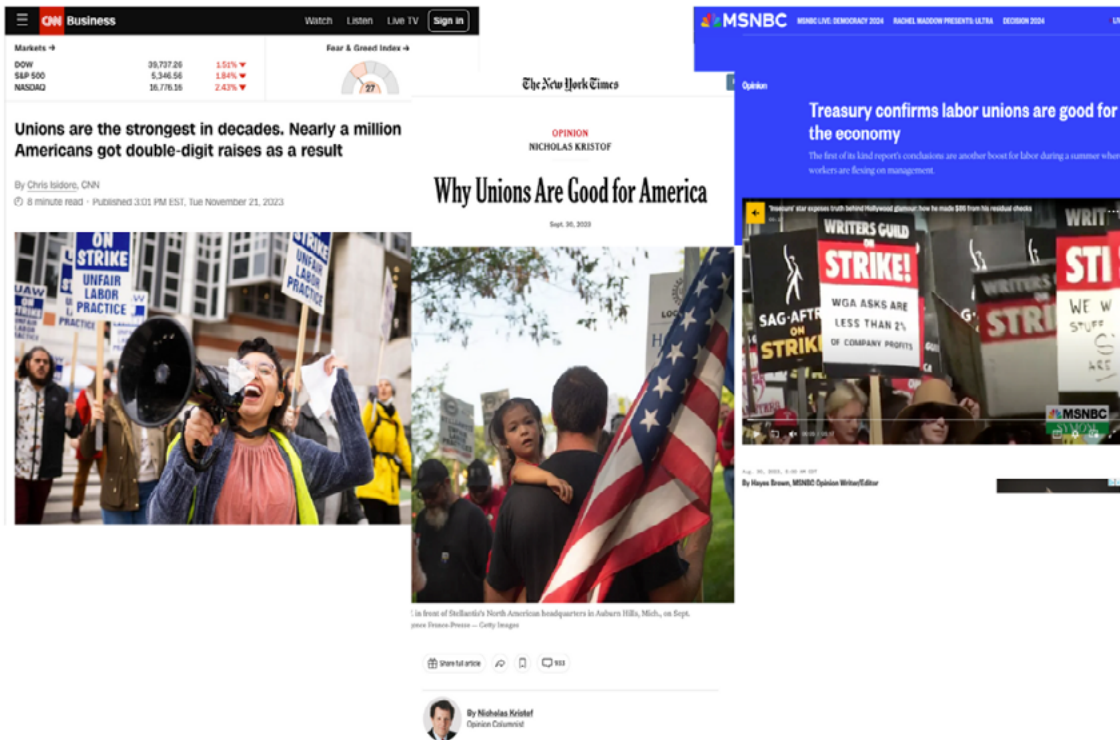
⁸ Hot Labor Summer.

⁹ Dorothy Singletary, “U.S. Labor Unions Are Having a Moment,” *American Constitution Society*, May 24, 2024.

¹⁰ Bruce Maiman, “Opinion: Labor Unions Are Making a Comeback,” *HuffPost*, September 3, 2023.

¹¹ David Leonhardt and Noam Scheiber, “Labor’s Very Good Year,” *The New York Times*, December 6, 2023.

¹² Steven Greenhouse, “US Unions Winning Big Gains amid ‘great Reset’ in Worker Power,” *The Guardian*, October 24, 2023.



“I’ve come to believe that unions are good not only for individual workers but also for America itself,” wrote Nicholas Kristof for *The New York Times*, citing substance abuse and the crumbling families of nonunionized workers.¹³ As CNN¹⁴ brought focus back to the benefits of unionization for workers, MSNBC attributed a “renewed growth of the middle class to the rebirth of unions.”¹⁵

A third category, which attacks those who question the incorruptibility of Big Labor, focuses on a recent wave of state legislation meant to ensure union accountability.¹⁶ This type of journalism often frowns upon conservative policies and politicians while crediting President Joe Biden as the “most-pro union president”¹⁷ in American history:

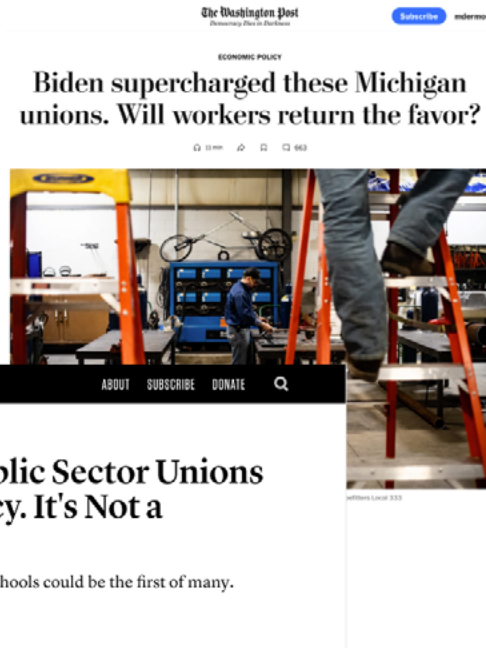
¹³ Nicholas Kristof, “Why Unions Are Good for America,” *The New York Times*, September 30, 2023.

¹⁴ Chris Isidore, “Unions Are the Strongest in Decades. Nearly a Million Americans Got Double-Digit Raises as a Result,” CNN, November 21, 2023.

¹⁵ Hayes Brown, “The Treasury Department Confirms That Unions Are a Big Win for the Economy,” MSNBC, August 30, 2023.

¹⁶ “Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis Signs Sweeping Union Reform Bill into Law,” Freedom Foundation, May 9, 2023.

¹⁷ “ICYMI: President Biden: I’m ‘the Most pro-Union President in American History. And I make No Apologies for It: AFL-CIO,” AFL-CIO, June 29, 2023.



It's "clear," according to *New York Magazine*, that if "pro-worker conservatism succeeds politically, working-class people will lose materially."¹⁸ And while *The Washington Post* insists that President Biden has proven his "firm" alliance with organized labor,¹⁹ *In These Times* characterizes red state labor reform as a threat to democracy itself.²⁰

Based on media coverage alone, "one would think," wrote Dominic Pino for *The National Review*, "unions have been going from strength to strength, surging in popularity and organizing new workers."²¹

But considering the decline of American unions, it's more likely that "an entire generation of journalists has been turned into labor activists."²²

For example, headlines claim that recent unionization efforts within Amazon facilities marked significant labor movement victories.²³ The numbers say otherwise. Amazon directly employs over one million people in the US²⁴ and 1.5 million people worldwide.²⁵ Amazon's 5,500 unionized workers²⁶ represent less than 1% of its total U.S. workforce.

¹⁸ Eric Levitz, "'Pro-Worker Conservatives' Are Just Union Busters in Disguise," *Intelligencer*, February 9, 2022.

¹⁹ Jeff Stein, "Biden Supercharged These Michigan Unions. Will Workers Return the Favor?" *The Washington Post*, February 26, 2024.

²⁰ Hamilton Nolan, "Those Who Hate Public Sector Unions Also Hate Democracy. It's Not a Coincidence," *In These Times*, June 12, 2024.

²¹ Dominic Pino, "The 'resurgence' of Organized Labor Is Media Spin," *National Review*, January 24, 2024.

²² Ben Smith, "Why the Media Loves Labor Now," *The New York Times*, November 8, 2021.

²³ Noam Scheiber, "Amazon is Cracking down on Union Organizing, Workers Say," *The New York Times*, December 8, 2023.

²⁴ Irene Tung and Yannet Lathrop, "A Good Living: Amazon Can and Must Make a Middle-Income Livelihood Possible for the People Who Work in Its Warehouses," *National Employment Law Project*, August 19, 2024.

²⁵ Daniela Coppola, "Amazon Quarterly Number of Employees 2024," *Statista*, August 6, 2024.

²⁶ Kara Deniz, "Amazon Labor Union Votes to Ratify Teamsters Affiliation," *International Brotherhood of Teamsters*, June 18, 2024.

The same can be said for several CVS stores in Rhode Island²⁷ and Las Vegas²⁸ whose pharmacists voted to join a new union, the Pharmacy Guild, in May of 2024. Just 30 pharmacists voted to unionize, a small fraction of the near 30,000 that CVS employees. Nonetheless, headlines like “Unions targeting Big Business: Disney, Mercedes-Benz, CVS face organizing campaigns,”²⁹ continue to misrepresent reality.

The State of Private Sector Unionization

The American labor movement began during the mid-19th century in response to the social and economic impact of the Industrial Revolution.³⁰ But, it wasn't until the 1930s that the Wagner Act granted legal protection for collective bargaining in the private sector.³¹

While early American unions organized factory workers and shoemakers,³² modern collective bargaining is now present at some level in nearly every industry. Those with the highest unionization rates among the private sector include utilities (19.9 percent), transportation (15.9 percent), and motion picture and sound recording industries (12.1 percent).³³ Additional industries now headed for unionization include a host of professions, from tech³⁴ to pharmacy workers.³⁵

Arguably, while unions in the private sector were once necessary, the greatest protection for workers now lies in a competitive economy that “opens up more doors than it closes.”³⁶

Despite what the media insists, unionization may, in fact, have some negative impact on workers. Employees who designate union leadership as their exclusive workplace representatives lose the ability to negotiate with their employers. This means, for example, that an individual employee cannot ask for a raise without lengthy negotiations involving union staff.³⁷

Even when pay bumps are on the table, unionized employees are generally limited to base pay formulas, wage caps, and promotions on a seniority basis, which often fail to reward individual performance or ability and instead protect subpar employees.

For employers, unionization means a ten to fifteen percent loss of profit thanks to the legal and logistical costs of regular negotiations.³⁸

This cost trickles down to consumers.³⁹ In the pharmacy industry, for example, it's patients who foot the bill for rising labor costs associated with unionization. That typically comes in the form

²⁷ Anna Kim Constantino, “Two CVS Retail Stores in Rhode Island Join New National Pharmacy Union,” CNBC, May 24, 2024.

²⁸ Anna Kim Constantino, “A CVS Health Pharmacy in Vegas Becomes First to Join New National Pharmacy Union,” CNBC, April 26, 2024.

²⁹ Nathan Bomey, “Unions Targeting Big Business: Disney, Mercedes-Benz, CVS Face Organizing Campaigns,” Axios, April 18, 2024.

³⁰ “Labor Wars in the U.S.,” American Experience, Accessed August 7, 2024.

³¹ “1935 Passage of the Wagner Act,” National Labor Relations Board, Accessed August 7, 2024.

³² David Montgomery, “Labor in the Industrial Era,” U.S. Department of Labor.

³³ “Union Members – 2023,” Bureau of Labor Statistics, January 23, 2024.

³⁴ Ina Fried, “Push to Unionize Tech Industry Makes Advances,” Axios, April 27, 2023.

³⁵ Nicole Goodkind, “IAM Healthcare Launches Campaign to Unionize Retail Pharmacy Workers,” CNN business, November 8, 2023.

³⁶ Richard Epstein, “The Decline of Unions Is Good News,” Hoover Institution, January 27, 2020.

³⁷ James Sherk, “What Unions Do: How Labor Unions Affect Jobs and the Economy,” The Heritage Foundation, May 21, 2009.

³⁸ Sherk, “What Unions Do.”

³⁹ Elizabeth Hicks, “Hicks: Unionizing Pharmacists Will Have Negative Consequences,” The Detroit News, July 22, 2024.



of a need to increase prices on retail goods sold in the pharmacy to keep pace with the increased labor costs being demanded of the industry. And as cheaper pharmaceutical services move online, pharmacists who trusted in the promise of unionization may be out of work.

Considering the potential impact on not only workers but employers and patients, it seems as though the unionization of pharmacists, highly skilled professionals who have more freedom than most to leave subpar workplaces for greener pastures, is unnecessary.

But rising costs and substandard raises aren't the only reasons workers should remain wary of unionization. Union members, who often pay one thousand dollars or more in dues and fees each year, likely expect most, if not all, of their dues to be spent in support of workplace representation.

In recent years, however, Big Labor's focus has shifted from negotiating contracts to electoral politics. During the 2020 election cycle, unions spent an estimated \$1.8 billion on political advocacy, the vast majority of which benefitted left-wing candidates and causes.⁴⁰

Among Big Labor's legislative priorities in the private sector is the Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act. Dubbed the "most significant worker empowerment legislation since the Great Depression" by the AFL-CIO,⁴¹ the PRO Act would revoke "right-to-work" laws in 28 states, which prohibit employees from being terminated for refusing to join a union.⁴²

Beyond misuse of membership dues in pursuit of a biased ideological agenda, workers must also consider widespread union corruption. In March 2024, the U.S. House of Representatives' Committee on Education and the Workforce launched an investigation into twelve private sector unions concerning "fraud, embezzlement, and corruption perpetrated by union officials." With 725 federal indictments and 693 convictions of union officials over the past decade by the Office of Labor Management Standards, the Committee's oversight efforts on just one dozen unions "involve more than \$3.2 million in embezzlement and \$220,000 in bribery."⁴³

It's no wonder, then, **that just six percent of workers in the private sector participate in union membership.** Despite the media's insistence that the state of the unions is stronger than ever before, fewer private employees are now covered by collective bargaining agreements "than at any time since the early 1900s."⁴⁴

The State of Public Sector Unionization

The 1930s Wagner Act exempted public employees from the right to collectively bargain. President Franklin Roosevelt staunchly opposed public sector unionization, insisting that the "very nature and purposes of government," funded entirely by taxpayers, makes it impossible to

⁴⁰ Alexander Thomas MacDonald, "Are Agency Fees Unconstitutional in the Private Sector?" The Federalist Society, February 24, 2023.

⁴¹ "What Is the Pro Act?: AFL-CIO," AFL-CIO, Accessed August 7, 2024

⁴² Ben Straka, "Right to Work - What Is It, and More Importantly, What Isn't It?" Freedom Foundation, July 10, 2018.

⁴³ "Chair Foxx Investigates 12 Unions for Recent Fraud, Corruption," Committee on Education & the Workforce, March 15, 2024.

⁴⁴ MacDonald, "Are Agency Fees Unconstitutional in the Private Sector?"

“represent fully or to bind the employer in mutual discussions with government employee organizations.”⁴⁵ Nonetheless, federal government employees won the right to collectively bargain in 1962, per an executive order issued by President Kennedy.⁴⁶

Public employees typically hold membership in one of four major government unions: the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME), the Service Employees International Union (SEIU), the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), or the National Education Association (NEA).

In the private sector, all parties involved in unionization have reason to preserve the employer's profitability. Ideally, union negotiators understand that immoderate demands have the potential to hand employers a negative cash flow, which may impact worker salaries, benefits, or employment status.

But government operations don't have a bottom line. In the public sector, President Roosevelt noted that “the employer is the whole people, who speak by means of laws enacted by their representatives in Congress.”⁴⁷ When union negotiators make unreasonable demands of government, which can always raise taxes, all Americans suffer from rising costs and less efficient government.

Unionization offers few benefits to public servants. Typically, public employees are protected by civil service statutes that provide job security from “arbitrary hiring and firing decisions.” Plus, while wages in the private sector fluctuate with the free market, government payrolls remain consistent alongside tax rates. And, if unsatisfied with their workplace conditions, public workers have a variety of alternate employment options not only within government, but throughout the private sector.⁴⁸

Like private sector unions, government unions spend the majority of membership dues on political activism rather than workplace representation. From 2021 to 2022, the four major public sector unions spent \$2.79 billion of member dues on political advocacy, leaving just \$554 million, less than twenty percent of total spending, for representational activities.⁴⁹ Again, the bulk of this political spending benefits Democratic candidates and progressive causes.

While the political spending of government unions is cause for concern for all members unaware or unsupportive of the ideological activism funded by their dues, this bias is especially concerning within the NEA and AFT, America's largest public school teacher unions.

The NEA and AFT's widespread presence have enabled pricey demands by union negotiators to increase the cost of state education by at least fifteen percent.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Paul Moreno, “The History of Public-Sector Unionism,” Hillsdale College.

⁴⁶ “50th Anniversary: Executive Order 10988,” U.S. Federal Labor Relations Authority.

⁴⁷ Moreno, “The History of Public-Sector Unionism.”

⁴⁸ Russ Brown, “Public Sector Unions Are a Growing Threat to Taxpayers,” RealClearMarkets, December 18, 2023.

⁴⁹ Andrew Holman and David Osborne, “How Government Unions Fund Politics Across ...” Commonwealth Foundation, December 2023.

⁵⁰ Randall W. Eberts, “Teachers Unions and Student Performance: Help or Hindrance?” The future of children, Spring 2007.



Again, like the private sector, corruption is common among union officials. As of February 2022, the Freedom Foundation, a government union watchdog, was engaged in thirteen federal lawsuits against six SEIU and AFSCME affiliates found forging or falsifying public employees' signatures on union membership forms.⁵¹

But unlike the private sector, public employees have a choice when it comes to union membership. The U. S. Supreme Court's decision in *Janus v. AFSCME* (2018) affirmed the First Amendment right of public workers to choose whether to pay union fees that ultimately support a controversial ideological agenda.⁵²

Union membership among public employees slid to 32.5 percent last year, the lowest on record since government union membership peaked at 40.2 percent in 1976.⁵³ As of June 2023, federal reports revealed that in the years since *Janus*, membership in the four largest government unions had declined by 10 percent, totaling 733,745 workers.⁵⁴ During that time, the Freedom Foundation's national outreach to public employees about their First Amendment right to walk away from union membership, in addition to pro-worker litigation, legislation, and community activation, contributed heavily to Big Labor's downturn.⁵⁵

Mainstream Media Misses the Mark

In the private sector, rising costs, meager results from workplace representation, and the high price of dues have led union membership to take a nosedive to just six percent of the workforce, the lowest rate on record.⁵⁶ Though last year's "hot labor summer" went viral, the so-called union "renaissance" was offset by a clear-cut record of corruption and misspent membership dues.

And across federal, state, and local government, out of control political activism, forgery, and inflated taxes has led hundreds of thousands of public servants to turn their backs on union bosses since the *Janus* decision cleared the way in 2018.⁵⁷

Though the media insists that "unions are the strongest in decades," membership continues to plummet. Amid claims of organized labor's resonant benefit to American life, rising costs in exchange for mediocre representation suggests otherwise. And though reporters claim that union accountability attempts "attack" workers' rights, legislation to this effect is supported by 87 percent of Americans.⁵⁸

⁵¹ "FEDERAL LAWSUITS AGAINST GOVERNMENT UNIONS FOR FORGING SIGNATURES ON MEMBERSHIP FORMS," Freedom Foundation, February 2022

⁵² "16-1466 *Janus v. State, County, and Municipal Employees ...*" United States Supreme Court, 2018.

⁵³ Reder Melvin, "The Rise and Fall of Unions: The Public Sector and the Private," *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Spring 1988.

⁵⁴ Maxford Nelsen, "Janus v. AFSCME at Five: Government Union Membership at Record Lows," Freedom Foundation, June 19, 2023.

⁵⁵ Freedom Foundation, Accessed August 7, 2024.

⁵⁶ Dan Burns, "US Union Membership Rate Hits Fresh Record Low in 2023 -Labor Dept.," Reuters, January 23, 2024.

⁵⁷ Nelsen, "Janus v. AFSCME at Five."

⁵⁸ "The National Right to Work Act," National Right to Work Committee, October 18, 2023.

But as reporters buttress Big Labor's nonacceptance of unmistakable union decline, traditional news is losing credibility, too. Nearly half of Americans now express concern about the media's commitment to truth.⁵⁹

Big Labor and its friends in mainstream media owe it to all Americans, especially within the working class, to come to terms with the reality of the state of our unions. And without a change of heart, it's unlikely that Big Labor's aspirational renaissance will come to fruition anytime soon.

⁵⁹ David Bauder, "News Organizations Have Trust Issues as They Gear up to Cover Another Election, a Poll Finds," AP News, May 1, 2024.



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Contact the author: mdermon@freedomfoundation.com

[360] 956-3482 | PO Box 552, Olympia, WA 98507