Nebraska’s Labor Movement: Exploring Union Membership, Perceptions, and Efficacy

Morgan Vogel
Tara Grell
Michael Lee
Meagan E. Paez

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/cparpubarchives
Part of the Demography, Population, and Ecology Commons, and the Public Affairs Commons
Please take our feedback survey at: https://unomaha.az1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_8cchtFmpDyGfBLE
Nebraska’s Labor Movement

Exploring Union Membership, Perceptions, and Efficacy
In 2022, U.S. approval of labor unions was at its highest point since 1965; however, apathy among labor union members persists and has significant implications for the labor movement more broadly. Although the share of U.S. workers who belong to a union has fallen over time, the majority of Americans view this as a bad thing for working people (59%) and the country overall (54%). In an effort to better understand the labor movement in Nebraska, the William Brennan Institute for Labor Studies (WBILS) partnered with the Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR), both housed in the College of Public Affairs and Community Service at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, to study union membership and participation in Nebraska and better understand members’ attitudes toward unions and union efficacy.

Among survey respondents, 43% have belonged to a union for less than five years, 19% between five to ten years, 13% between ten to twenty years, and 25% over 20 years. The survey demonstrates that, overall, respondents have a high regard for unions and believe workers are better off when affiliated with a union. This is true among both respondents who are currently members of a union and those who do not belong to a union.

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

UNO CPAR developed an online survey using Qualtrics Survey Software. The survey was distributed to key labor organizations in Nebraska and was also open to members of the public via distribution on social media. The survey was open from September 2023 through February 2024. In total, the survey received 600 responses.

74% of respondents are currently members of a union

26% are not currently in a union

Among survey respondents, 43% have belonged to a union for less than five years, 19% between five to ten years, 13% between ten to twenty years, and 25% over 20 years. The survey demonstrates that, overall, respondents have a high regard for unions and believe workers are better off when affiliated with a union. This is true among both respondents who are currently members of a union and those who do not belong to a union.

82% believe unions are a positive force in this country

72% believe unions are a positive force in this state

76% believe unions are a positive force in this country

59% believe unions are a positive force in this state

---

Respondents were asked about the large reduction in the percentage of workers represented by unions over the past several decades and whether this is good or bad for working people. Among respondents who belong to a union, nearly 60% believe this reduction in representation is very bad for working people. Interestingly, among respondents who do not currently belong to a union, 58% view this reduction in representation as very bad for working people as well. Findings indicate that, regardless of involvement in a union, respondents share a positive view of unions and recognize the benefits of being in a union for working people.

89% of respondents who currently belong to a union are glad labor unions exist

Survey findings also indicate that union members value the sense of belonging and community that comes with being in a union. Among respondents, 60% feel a strong sense of belonging to their union and 55% have strong bonds to their union that would be hard to cut off. The data suggest that union members value community and collective commitment to a cause as experienced through union membership. Unsurprisingly then, 81% of respondents believe that workers need strong trade unions to protect their interests and 77% believe in the goals of organized labor.

In terms of union efficacy, survey findings demonstrate that unions are overall highly effective in advocating for, protecting, and improving workers’ rights. Over 60% of respondents agree that their union is effective at improving their pay, improving their physical work environment, and protecting their employment security. According to respondents, the top benefits of belonging to a union include access to pensions and retirement security and access to affordable healthcare and medical benefits.

Survey findings suggest that there is support for unions and the labor movement more broadly in Nebraska. This support is evident in how union members perceive the purpose and effectiveness of unions. However, this support does not necessarily translate into members’ willingness to assume leadership roles within their local union chapters. When asked about their involvement in union leadership, 23% of respondents currently hold a leadership position in their local chapter, 10% have held a position in the past, and 67% have never held a leadership position. Although identifying the next generation of union leadership may present challenges, the labor movement overall retains strong support in Nebraska.

According to survey respondents, union membership offers many benefits.

- Job security and stability
- Sense of belonging and collective voice
- Competitive and fair pay
- Education and training opportunities
- Affordable healthcare and medical benefits
- Equal opportunities and representation
- Access to pensions and retirement benefits
- Improved safety and working conditions

RESEARCH DESIGN

UNO CPAR developed a survey instrument using Qualtrics Survey Software. Survey questions asked about general attitudes toward unions as well as union efficacy. Survey questions were adapted based on validated survey instruments from McShane (1986), Sverke & Kuruvilla (1995), Educators for Excellence (2018), and the American Federation of Teachers (2022).

The survey was open from September 23, 2023 through February 26, 2024. In that time, the survey garnered 600 responses.

The survey was open to union members and nonunion members to better understand how union members and members of the public at large feel toward labor unions in Nebraska. The survey was shared on social media on the William Brennan Institute for Labor Studies Facebook, X, and LinkedIn platforms.

Additionally, the survey link was emailed to the following organizations with a direct appeal to forward the survey to their member lists:

- Nebraska State AFL-CIO member unions
- Omaha Federation of Labor member unions
- Midwest Nebraska Central Labor Council member unions
- Lincoln Central Labor Union member unions
- Nebraska State Education Association member unions
- Nebraska State Democratic Party
- Nebraska State Republican Party
- Douglas County Democratic Party
- Douglas County Republican Party
- Nebraska Young Republicans

Note, not all respondents answered all questions, so the frequency of responses will vary from question to question.
**SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS**

### Age
- 30 or less: 142, 27%
- 31-40: 110, 21%
- 41-50: 97, 18%
- 51-60: 67, 13%
- 61-70: 61, 12%
- 71-80: 45, 8%
- 81+: 8, 2%

### Race
- 10, 2% American Indian or Alaska Native
- 9, 2% Asian
- 12, 2% Black or African American
- 36, 6% Latino/Latina/Latinx
- 3, 1% Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- 508, 86% White
- 10, 2% Other

### Gender
- MALE: 427, 75%
- FEMALE: 128, 23%
- NON-BINARY: 4, 1%
- PREFER NOT TO ANSWER: 7, 1%

### Industry
- 278, 50% Skilled trades
- 55, 10% Construction
- 11, 2% Manufacturing
- 19, 3% Health care
- 49, 9% Education
- 29, 5% Government
- 12, 2% Transportation
- 27, 5% Public sector
- 81, 14% Other, please write in

### Race
- 18% High School Graduate
- 20% Some College
- 20% Trade or Vocational School
- 8% Associate Degree
- 18% Bachelor’s Degree
- 16% Advanced Degree (Master’s, J.D., Ph.D., etc.)

### Is your workplace currently unionized?
- 110, 21%
- 97, 18%
- 67, 13%
- 61, 12%
- 45, 8%
- 8, 2%

### Are you currently a member of a union?
- Yes: 409, 74%
- No: 145, 26%

### How long have you belonged to a labor union?
- Less than 5 years: 164, 43%
- Between 5 to 10 years: 75, 19%
- Between 10 to 20 years: 50, 13%
- Over 20 years: 96, 25%

### What type of union do you belong to?
- 249, 65% Craft union
- 78, 20% Industrial union
- 45, 12% Public service union
- 5, 1% Federation
- 0, 0% Uplift union
- 0, 0% Identity-exclusive union
- 1, 0% Enterprise union
- 6, 2% Other

### Do you currently hold or have you previously held a leadership position within your local union chapter?
- Yes: 418, 77%
- No: 124, 23%
- Yes, in the past: 39, 10%
- No: 258, 67%
UNION ATTITUDES

The first section of the survey asked respondents to share their general attitudes toward unions and the potential benefits of being in a union. Respondents were asked to respond to a series of statements, on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Employees are considerably better off when they belong to a labor union.

I am glad that labor unions exist.

Please read the following statements and rate the degree to which you agree on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

- Strongly agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Don’t know

Unions are a positive force in this county.

Unions are a positive force in this state.

People would be worse off if there were no unions in this country.

Most people benefit from labor unions.

Over the past several decades there has been a large reduction in the percentage of workers who are represented by unions. Do you think this has been...
The second section of the survey asked respondents to share their general perceptions of union efficacy and how effective they believe unions are at protecting and improving workers’ rights. Respondents were asked to respond to a series of statements, on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

**UNION EFFICACY**

Please read the following statements and rate the degree to which you agree or disagree on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

1. Workers need strong trade unions to protect their interests.
2. I believe in the goals of organized labor.
3. My union and I have just about the same basic values.
4. The decisions made by my union mostly reflect my opinions.
5. My union’s problems are my problems.
6. I feel that I am an important part of my union.
7. My union means a great deal to me personally.
8. I feel a strong sense of belonging to my union.
9. The sense of community one feels in the union is unique.
10. I have strong bonds to my union, bonds that would be hard to cut off.

**My union is effective at improving my pay.**

**My union is effective at improving my physical work environment.**

**My union is effective at protecting my employment security.**

**My union is effective at providing me with interesting work opportunities.**

**My union is effective at working with my employer to make operations function in a better way.**

**My union is effective at resolving a work situation and bringing about an improvement.**

**My union is effective at giving me more influence over my work.**
Which of the following union activities, if any, have you done in the past year? Select all that apply.

- Read news from your union: 280, 19%
- Vote in a union election: 200, 14%
- Speak with your union representative: 194, 14%
- Attend a union meeting or event: 318, 22%
- Complete a survey from your union: 182, 13%
- Participate in a rally organized by your union: 91, 6%
- Take an online advocacy action organized by your union: 64, 4%
- Serve as an elected or appointed union representative: 96, 7%

PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF UNIONS

In addition to surveying union members about their experience belonging to a union, the survey was also open to members of the public to gain a better understanding of their general perceptions of unions. In general, public perception of unions is positive.

Over the past several decades there has been a large reduction in the percentage of workers who are represented by unions. Do you think this has been...

- Very good for working people: 13, 8%
- Somewhat good for working people: 8, 5%
- Somewhat bad for working people: 46, 29%
- Very bad for working people: 91, 58%

*Respondents are not in labor union.
Please read the following statements and rate the degree to which you agree on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

People would be worse off if there were no unions in this country.

- **Strongly agree**: 83%
- **Somewhat agree**: 9%
- **Somewhat disagree**: 5%
- **Strongly disagree**: 3%
- **Don't know**: 1%

Most people benefit from labor unions.

- **Strongly agree**: 69%
- **Somewhat agree**: 22%
- **Somewhat disagree**: 6%
- **Strongly disagree**: 3%
- **Don't know**: 1%

Unions are a positive force in this county.

- **Strongly agree**: 76%
- **Somewhat agree**: 18%
- **Somewhat disagree**: 1%
- **Strongly disagree**: 1%
- **Don't know**: 1%

Unions are a positive force in this state.

- **Strongly agree**: 65%
- **Somewhat agree**: 26%
- **Somewhat disagree**: 9%
- **Strongly disagree**: 5%
- **Don't know**: 3%

I am glad that labor unions exist.

- **Strongly agree**: 84%
- **Somewhat agree**: 12%
- **Somewhat disagree**: 2%
- **Strongly disagree**: 2%
- **Don't know**: 1%

Employees are considerably better off when they belong to a labor union.

- **Strongly agree**: 65%
- **Somewhat agree**: 26%
- **Somewhat disagree**: 9%
- **Strongly disagree**: 6%
- **Don't know**: 3%

*Respondents are not in labor union.
How likely are you to join a labor union in the future?

- Very likely: 45, 29%
- Somewhat likely: 29, 19%
- Somewhat unlikely: 22, 14%
- Not at all likely: 60, 38%

*Respondents are not in labor union

Please list 2 reasons why you choose not to be a member of a union.

- Not available/not eligible: 92, 32%
- Retired: 93, 32%
- Industry/profession specific: 47, 16%
- Workplace concerns: 50, 17%
- Lack of knowledge: 7, 2%

*Respondents are not in labor union

TEACHER UNIONS

Given the teacher workforce shortage and recent challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers in Nebraska (Peal, 2023), a portion of the survey was devoted to understanding attitudes toward teacher unions. For those respondents who identified their industry as education, they were asked an additional set of questions about teacher unions. These findings are reported below.

Do you think of teacher unions or associations as...?

- Absolutely essential: 18, 95%
- Important but not essential: 1, 5%
- Something you could do without: 0, 0%
- Not sure: 0, 0%

To what degree do you believe that your perspective as a teacher is represented in policy decisions in your union?

- A great deal: 13, 68%
- Somewhat: 5, 26%
- Not very much: 1, 5%
- None at all: 0, 0%
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
Without a union, teachers would be vulnerable to school politics or administrators who abuse their power.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strongly agree</th>
<th>Somewhat agree</th>
<th>Somewhat disagree</th>
<th>Strongly disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19, 100%</td>
<td>0, 0%</td>
<td>0, 0%</td>
<td>0, 0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How important to you are each of the following for teacher unions to do?

- Bargain for wages/salary
  - Extremely important: 95%
  - Very important: 5%

- Bargain for health/retirement benefits
  - Extremely important: 95%
  - Very important: 5%

- Protect teachers’ jobs
  - Slightly important: 84%
  - Extremely important: 16%

- Provide information about political candidates and their issue positions
  - Extremely important: 63%
  - Very important: 26%
  - Moderately important: 11%

- Support/endorse political candidates
  - Extremely important: 68%
  - Very important: 16%
  - Moderately important: 11%
  - Slightly important: 5%

### UNION BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS

**Please list 2 important benefits that you feel you receive as a member of your union.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefit</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Job security and stability</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial benefits</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare and insurance benefits</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retirement and future security</td>
<td>156</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Representation and collective voice</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education and training opportunities</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community and support</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and work conditions</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Please list 2 areas of improvement based on your current labor experience.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pay and benefits</td>
<td>178</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job security and stability</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthcare and insurance</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Training and education</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Union representation and advocacy</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication and transparency</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Workplace environment and conditions</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
REFERENCES


