

UNION

COLLECTIVE ACTION

WORKER POWER

[Home](#) > [Blogs](#) > [Union Resurgence in the Ivory Tower: Findings from the 2024 Higher Education Bargaining Directory](#)

Union Resurgence in the Ivory Tower: Findings from the 2024 Higher Education Bargaining Directory

 29 Sep 2024

Joseph van der Naald



Recent analyses of the American labor movement have centered around two opposing facts. On the one hand, last year union density, or the percentage of the labor force that are union members, [reached its lowest point](#) in the more than 90 years the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) has collected this data.* Though historical comparisons before this point are difficult, it seems the last time recorded membership density was [this low was 1910](#). Thus, purely in terms of union membership

rates, pronouncements of a [New Gilded Age for labor](#) appear truer now than when they were first written more than a decade ago.

At the same time, labor in the United States seems to be on the march. Over the past few years, unions are [filing for and winning](#) more [new National Labor Relations Board \(NLRB\) certification elections](#) in the private-sector – the domain of the labor market where labor has seen its greatest declines – than at [any point in the last two decades](#). As [other commentators have noted](#), unions are also enjoying higher rates of public approval than they have seen in several years, particularly [among those under age 30](#). This heightened enthusiasm is part of what is undergirding exciting new service-sector organizing at places like Starbucks, Apple, and Trader Joe's. Nevertheless, to paraphrase [economist Robert Solow](#), labor's recent surge has on a national scale so far shown up everywhere except for the union statistics.

In contrast to this seeming paradox, labor unions in the higher education sector have made durable and substantial gains over the course of the past decade, particularly among [non-tenure track faculty](#) and graduate and undergraduate student employees. In the National Center for the Study of Collective Bargaining's recently released 2024 Directory of Bargaining Agents and Contracts in Institutions of Higher Education ([2024 Directory](#)), my co-authors William A. Herbert, Jacob Apkarian and I document these trends in detail. In the landscape of US labor union scholarship, the 2024 Directory is unique in that we capture the extent of collective bargaining for a set of occupations in a single industry (public and non-for-profit higher education). Moreover, in the 2024 Directory, we have collected and made available perhaps the only publicly-available repository of collective bargaining agreements for a single industry, providing scholars and practitioners with free access to current and recent contracts.

Our research for the 2024 Directory, detailed in the report's summary of findings, provides several important insights. I would like to highlight some of the most important findings here.

Among higher education faculty, we find that, as of 2024, more than one quarter (27 percent) are covered by union contracts. Union coverage within public institutions is even more extensive: among the nearly 694,000 instructional faculty at public four-year institutions, one-third are covered by a collective bargaining agreement, while at two-year community colleges more than half of the 256,700 are covered.

Faculty at private institutions make up 34 percent of the more than 1.4 million higher education faculty in the United States, yet they comprise just 10 percent of the unionized faculty labor force. Unionization at private institutions is far less extensive than it is among public colleges and universities, with only around 8 percent of faculty covered by a union contract. The reasons for this sectoral division stem in part from the [Supreme Court's](#) 1980 National Labor Relations Board v. Yeshiva University decision, which excluded tenure and tenure-track private college and university faculty from the collective bargaining rights afforded to most workers under the National Labor Relations Act. The Court concluded these faculty were "supervisors" excluded from union membership because of their role in hiring, firing, and making tenure decisions about faculty, along with other managerial decisions.

However, the Yeshiva decision is largely inapplicable to non-tenure track, or contingent, faculty who have no real role in managerial decision-making. As a result, since 2012, large scale organizing drives such as the Service Employees International Union (SEIU)'s Faculty Forward campaign have focused on unionizing large numbers of faculty off the tenure track. These efforts have borne fruit across public and private institutions, as the vast majority (72 percent) of new faculty collective bargaining units since 2012 are exclusively composed of contingent instructors, while the number of private-sector faculty under a collective bargaining agreement has grown 55 percent, comprising more than half of all newly-unionized faculty over this period.



stock.adobe.com - kasto

Student workers make up the other leading edge of the new academic labor movement. Unionization among graduate student employees, so-called GSEs, since 2012 has been nothing short of astounding. The number of GSEs covered by union contracts over this period has more than doubled (from approximately 64,400 to 150,100), and across public and private institutions a whopping roughly 38 percent of GSEs are now unionized. As is the case among contingent faculty, the biggest developments have occurred at private universities. In 2012, zero GSEs at private institutions were covered by a collective bargaining agreement; however, by 2024 more than 51,600 have been unionized. Though smaller in absolute terms, undergraduate student worker unionization has followed a similarly-explosive trajectory. Nineteen exclusively-undergraduate student worker bargaining units representing more than 3,500 workers have been certified as of January 2024, with 17 of these units certified over the course of only three years.

Finally, the 2024 Directory documents the steady growth in unionization among post-doctoral scholars and academic researchers. More than 17,600 of these workers are now covered by collective bargaining agreements in 12 distinct units; however, there are even more unionized post-doctoral scholars and academic researchers included in units of organized faculty. Exclusively post-doctoral scholar and academic researcher units existed at only three universities before the 2018, yet in the following years unionism has spread to at least seven new institutions, including three medical schools.

The spike in academic unionism documented in the 2024 Directory is both the product of long-running trends and contemporary developments. From the [beginnings of modern academic unionism](#), collective bargaining has generally appealed to those most excluded from the prestige and material benefits of the academy's ivory towers. While it was community college professors who once comprised the bulk of the organized professoriate, a new [underpaid and overworked academic precariat](#) composed of contingent or fixed-term instructors and researchers, as well as student employees, have increasingly sought union representation.

Among student workers in particular, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic looms large. While the AFL-CIO's campaigns on college campuses helped engender an [earlier wave of student labor activism](#) in the late 1990s and early 2000s, graduate worker union organizing ramped up in earnest following the Great Recession and the Occupy Wall Street mobilizations. After the NLRB solidified GSEs' status as "employees" protected by private-sector labor law in its [2016 Columbia University decision](#), teaching and research assistants at private institutions increasingly sought certification elections. An initial burst of graduate worker unionization was slowed substantially by the onset of the pandemic. Following the cessation of the initial set of pandemic lockdowns, however, GSE unionization exploded. Between 2021 and 2023, more than three times the number of GSEs have unionized than were organized during the prior eight years combined. The GSE organizing wave is part of a [larger trend](#) toward the rising enthusiasm for, or at the very least curiosity toward, labor unions among younger often college-educated workers noted above. But as my co-authors and I have [argued elsewhere](#), the pandemic also acted as a dose of gasoline poured onto a simmering

flame exacerbating graduate workers' long-running frustrations with low pay, increasing teaching and research responsibilities, and a lack of future academic employment prospects.

As Benjamin Fong [has recently argued](#), substantially reversing union density decline will require labor to pursue the mass organization of large bargaining units of workers. Higher education is one of the few sectors where this is occurring. To take one dramatic example, the [successful unionization](#) of 17,000 University of California graduate researchers in 2021 effectively increased national union density by 0.1 percent. But in reality, higher education is only a small fraction of the American labor force and an expanding higher education unionism is by itself, of course, not enough to stem labor's declining fortunes on a national scale.

Yet, the organization of higher education workers also holds great promise in its capacity to mobilize workers in the much needed defense of both a crucial public resource and spaces of open debate that are increasingly under attack, as [emergent cross-campus alliances](#) like the newly formed Labor for Higher Education and Higher Education Labor United (HELU) seek to do. The 2024 Directory both constitutes a data-rich analytical contribution to that project, and per the National Center's mission, contributes toward raising awareness of the utility of collective bargaining as an important dimension of workplace democracy.

*~The union membership data cited in this paragraph includes data from two sources: 1) the BLS historical series, which before 1983 relied on membership data provided by unions, 2) and the current BLS union membership series, which is based primarily on data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau through the Current Population Survey (CPS).

*If you have any questions or concerns about the Power At Work Blog
comments section, please send an email to poweratwork@theburnscenter.org.*

What do you think?

2 Responses



Upvote



Downvote

0 Comments

 Login ▼

G

Start the discussion...

LOG IN WITH

OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS 

Name



Share

Best Newest Oldest

Be the first to comment.