

CHAPTER 14

UNION ORGANIZING IN CALIFORNIA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, unions in California are showing signs of revitalization. After many years of decline, union membership rose from 2,154,000 to 2,286,000 in 1999, and for the first time in several decades, the percentage of the California workforce that is unionized grew slightly, to 16.6 percent. The new growth is a consequence of aggressive efforts by a number of key unions and local, state, and national AFL-CIO bodies. This chapter explores labor's efforts to meet the challenges for revitalizing its movement in the current era, focusing on new approaches and strategies for increasing union membership.

The decline of the U.S. trade union movement over the last thirty years is a well-known story, and although there is little scholarship devoted specifically to California, the state's experience parallels that of the nation. Union decline is a consequence of a multitude of forces, including a loss of employment in some highly unionized industries and a restructuring of other industries via subcontracting and outsourcing and organized labor's own emphasis on servicing current members rather than organizing new ones (Goldfield 1987; Moody 1988). Above all, the loss of union membership is the result of a renewed offensive by anti-union employers who have fought unions on a variety of fronts, and have successfully shaped government labor policy to their advantage. Changes in the implementation of the National Labor Relations Act and limits of the law itself have undermined workers' fundamental right to organize. Quoting a recent Human Rights Watch report (2000),

In the United States, millions of workers are excluded from coverage by laws to protect rights of organizing, bargaining, and striking. For workers who are covered by such laws, recourse for labor rights violations is often delayed to a point where it ceases to provide redress. When they are applied, remedies are weak and often ineffective. In a system replete with all the appearance of legality and due process, workers' exercise of rights to organize, to bargain, and to strike in the United States has been frustrated by many employers who realize they have little to fear from labor law enforcement through a ponderous, delay-ridden legal system with meager remedial powers.

While the experience of union decline in California is not unique, California may be the forerunner of change. California is certainly the bellwether for the new environment that labor must operate in. As the nation's leading receiving state for new immigrants as well as the center of the economic transformations associated with the information technology revolution, California presents unions with the double challenge of a new workforce and a new economy. Recent events suggest that

the AFL-CIO has made a commitment to be much more welcoming of immigrants and people of color than at many other times in its past. This effort is producing significant successes, many of them in California. Labor has made fewer inroads into organizing new or restructured industries, however, and this remains one of its key challenges.

The decline of unions has contributed to increasing income polarization in California, now well documented in numerous studies (Reed et al. 1996; Reich this volume). Unions in California, as elsewhere, have provided a measure of well-being for workers not only by improving wages, but also by providing key benefits such as health insurance and pensions. If California is to pave a more equitable path of development in the future, surely unions will play a fundamental role. As we will see, some of the most important efforts to improve the lot of low-wage workers are being led by unions, not only as they fight their traditional battles over distribution of revenues within firms, but also as they exert their political clout to reform state economic policy and improve the climate for organizing.

This chapter describes the current state of unionization in California, painting a picture of union membership in the state using available quantitative data. The article then turns to an analysis of the emerging strategies California unions are using as they attempt to rebuild and grow, documenting new directions and innovative practices.

California unions by the numbers¹

In 1999, growth in union membership in California led the nation, with a net increase of 132,000 members. California, the nation's most populous state, also has the most union members, with 2,286,000 in over 1,300 local unions. California ranks 15th among all states in union density, however, with union members comprising 16.6 percent of the workforce (BNA 2000).

Unionization patterns in California typify national trends in many respects. Figure 1 shows the downward trends in union density (the percentage of the work force that are union members) in California and the nation from the peak period in the mid-fifties to 1978, with a steady decline in the ensuing years². Private sector density has fallen particularly sharply and now stands at 10.2 percent both nationally and in California in 1999. In manufacturing employment, union density is significantly lower in California (8.5 percent), compared to the nation (15.6 percent), reflecting the low rates of unionization among manufacturing workers in Los Angeles, now the nation's largest center of manufacturing (Wolff et al. 1998). Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of union members by broad sector in California and the nation, showing that union members in manufacturing only account for 7.2 percent of all union members in California, less than half the national figure. The same figure shows that public sector workers account for a greater proportion of union members in California (48.3 percent) than in the nation as a whole (42.8 percent).

A disaggregated look at union density in California by industry illustrates one of the major challenges unions face: low union density in a number of key sectors that account for a large portion of employment in the state. Figure 3 shows the distribution of employment by detailed industry, divided by union and non-union membership. The figure illustrates relatively high union density in public administration (47.5 percent), educational services (46 percent), transportation and communication (37 percent), utilities (54 percent), hospitals (24 percent), construction (24 percent), the entertainment industry (17 percent) and social services (17 percent). All other sectors have less than 10 percent union density. In fact, other than educational services, the five sectors that employ the largest percentage of workers all have union density of less than 10 percent. As worrisome, the sectors that are predicted to account for the largest absolute job growth over this decade also have low union density, as shown in figure 4³. Union density is negligible not only in the high tech sectors, which are spread among business

services, professional services, and manufacturing, but also in a number of service and manufacturing sectors that have become vast fields of low-wage work.

Union membership patterns for key demographic groups are quite similar in California and in the nation as a whole, with a couple of notable exceptions. Union density among women is 15.5 percent in California compared to only 11.4 percent in the nation as a whole, due largely to the higher rate of public sector unionization in the state. In addition, union density among African Americans is 26.7 percent in California compared to 17.2 percent in the nation as a whole, again due to their overrepresentation in public sector employment in the state. But since they are only 6.3 percent of the state's population, they comprise only 10.8 percent of the state's union members (see figure 5).

Union density among Latinos is slightly higher in California (13.4 percent) than in the nation (10.4 percent), and among Asians, California's density (12.9 percent) is quite close to the nation's (12.3 percent). However, because California's population has a greater proportion of Latinos and Asians than other states, unions also have a higher proportion of these groups, and a lower proportion of whites, also shown in figure 5. While nation-wide, 81 percent of union members are white, in California 55.9 percent are white, reflecting California's new status as a majority minority state.

California has more foreign-born residents than any other state, and the immigrant workforce will continue to grow in numbers and in importance in the coming years. To date, unions have not succeeded in recruiting immigrants at anywhere near their proportion of California's working population. Native-born workers are more likely to be union members than the foreign-born, with union density at 19 percent and 10.4 percent respectively. However, as Waldinger (2000) and Milkman (2000) noted for the mid-1990s, naturalized citizens, who are more likely to be long-term immigrants, have comparable rates of unionization than California workers as a whole. In the period 1997-1999 naturalized citizens in California had slightly higher unionization rates than all California workers, at 17.1 percent. However, non-citizens, who are more likely to be more recent arrivals, have extremely low rates of unionization, at 8.5 percent. Again, even though union density of the foreign-born is below average, they comprise a full 20.6 percent of all California union members, simply because of their high overall presence in the California workforce (as shown in figure 6). This is a striking contrast to the nation as a whole, where the foreign-born comprise only 9.5 percent of union members.

These demographic data should by no means be construed to reflect the willingness or preference of different groups to join unions. Instead, it reflects the distinctive employment patterns among different ethnic groups and whether or not the sectors that these groups are concentrated in were unionized at some point in the past. As Milkman (2000) points out, the low rates of unionization among foreign-born Latinos is due to their low numbers in public sector employment, where union density is high, and their high numbers in private sector employment, especially low-wage services and manufacturing, where union density is low.

The rewards of unionization are especially large for groups that are otherwise concentrated at the low end of the wage scale and that have largely been left out of the benefits of the new economy (Freeman 1993). The union wage premium, measured here as the ratio of the average wage for union members and non-union members within each demographic group, while important for all groups, is especially large for African Americans and Latinos, as well as for women, as shown in table 1. Latino union members, on average, earn \$15.80 per hour, compared to an average of \$10.50 for Latino non-union members. This is especially important because Latinos have experienced the greatest wage declines of any ethnic group in California over the 1990s (Benner et al. 1999).

The union wage premium also varies by educational level, as shown in table 2. While union members with 12 years of schooling or less earned on average approximately \$15 per hour, compared to

an average of \$10.28 for non-union members with the same education. For workers with more than a high school education, the union/non-union wage differential is much smaller, at \$21.25 compared to \$19.25 per hour. While this is no surprise, it has important public policy implications, since workers with less education have experienced large decreases in wages over the last twenty years (Benner et al. 1999; California Budget Project 1999). Unionization provides an important means of protection for these workers, who are otherwise punished in the marketplace. And while more education and training have been put forth as the most important means to increase wages of these workers, employment projections suggest that there aren't enough jobs requiring higher levels of education and training to go around. The California Employment Development Department (EDD) predicts that almost 40 percent of jobs created between 1993 and 2005 will require no more than a few weeks of on-the-job training (California Budget Project 1999).

This quantitative description of unionization in California highlights several important points that will be explored in more depth in the next section. First, given the importance of immigrants in the current and projected California workforce, the low unionization rate among this group presents both a challenge and an opportunity. As we will see, the AFL-CIO has taken seriously the challenge of organizing the nation's immigrant work force, with California, and in particular Los Angeles, as the main testing ground.

Secondly, the data show in stark terms that unions must confront the issue of low density in key and growing sectors of the economy. This is true not only for the high-tech sectors, where unionization is negligible, but also large parts of the low-skilled service economy. Devising strategies to build density in these new or restructured industries is a key challenge for the future.

Finally, given the severe problem of wage polarization in the state, the data reveal that unions can perform an important social function by protecting wages among key groups of workers. Unions still serve an important equalizing function by raising the wages particularly of people of color and the less skilled and educated, groups that have largely been left behind in the new economy (see Reich, this volume). For African Americans, high union density and high-wage premiums for employment in union jobs have protected a significant part of California's black middle class. For Latinos, the fastest growing segment of the work force, union wage premiums are also high, but access to union jobs has been limited. For Asians, the story is less obvious because the union wage premium is much smaller. However, a more disaggregated look at Asian subgroups might reveal clearer patterns.

The "New Unionism" in California

The net addition of 132,000 union members in 1999 stands in stark contrast to the bleak picture of persistent union decline painted in the last section. Who are these new union members, what sectors do they work in, and what strategies did they use to win union representation?⁴ While answers to these questions are incomplete, an analysis of what we do know can inform the larger question: Can we expect this scale of success to continue in the years to come?

The unionization of the 74,000 homecare workers in Los Angeles County in 1999 was by far the biggest organizing victory of recent decades. It is important to note, however, that there were other significant victories in 1999, although our information is extremely incomplete because the AFL-CIO just began systematically recording information on organizing victories in the year 2000. The most prominent organizing victories include ten thousand UC graduate students affiliated with the United Auto Workers, who won union recognition from the University of California after at least 17 years of struggle. The American Federation of Teachers organized 3,000 classified (non-teacher) employees. The Service Employees International Union (SEIU) also organized several thousand hospital workers

and about six thousand public sector workers. And there were others. In the year 2000, when the AFL-CIO started systematically recording organizing victories, 35,000 new members joined unions as a result of organizing from January through July.

The Homecare Workers Victory

This success was the culmination of a 12-year organizing drive by the SEIU, and followed smaller victories for homecare workers in the five Bay Area counties of Alameda, San Francisco, San Mateo and Santa Clara and Contra Costa County, where about twenty thousand home care workers have unionized. The fact that it took place in Los Angeles, and that about half the new homecare union members are immigrants (state-wide the homecare workforce is even more heavily immigrant) is extremely significant, illustrating both the immensity of Southern California's low-wage workforce and the potential for unions to tap the discontent such working conditions generate. The homecare victory illustrates three important approaches that unions are using in a variety of other sectors in California and the nation. These are carrying out grassroots organizing among the low-wage, immigrant workforce, building coalitions with community-based organizations and/or consumers, and using political clout to improve the climate for organizing.

SEIU built an industry-wide campaign that was tailored to the unique features of the homecare industry; features that presented both obstacles and opportunities. Homecare emerged in its current form as a result of the creation of the 1973 federal In-Home Supportive Services program, designed to save states money by delivering services in the homes of the care recipients. The system was favored by some advocacy groups because help with daily activities such as cleaning, cooking and bathing could allow the elderly and people with disabilities to live at home rather than in an institution or nursing home (White 1999). While ultimately funded by state and federal social service money channeled to counties, in practice, workers were hired by the "consumers" (care recipients) themselves, who were allocated quotas of homecare services according to income and disability criteria.

The union built a three-prong strategy tailored to the industry and consisting of: 1) grassroots organizing among the largely minority, immigrant, and female workforce, 2) establishing coalitions of homecare workers and care recipients, together with the endorsement of religious and community organizations, and 3) engaging these coalitions in passing legislation and establishing public policy that created centralized public authorities in each county that became employers of record with whom the union could bargain. Clearly, the fact that homecare is ultimately funded by the government presented a unique opportunity. This allowed SEIU to use its political clout to design and implement policies to reorganize the industry. And because the in-home care system provided very uneven quality of care for consumers, it presented an opportunity for the union to form a coalition with community groups representing the sick, elderly, and people with disabilities to improve the quality of services.

Grassroots organizing was the first pillar of the SEIU's strategy. The SEIU spent twelve years building a base with homecare workers through on the ground grassroots organizing. The union spent substantial resources locating the African American and immigrant women who work alone in thousands of private homes dispersed throughout Los Angeles County. The difficulty of recruiting union supporters was compounded by the high turnover rate among homecare workers, in some years approaching 50 percent. The union worked at becoming the workers' advocate even before they indicated support for unionization, filing wage claims, providing assistance to workers in finding jobs, and organizing to raise the state minimum hourly wage from \$3.75 to \$4.25 (Delp and Quan 2000).

The union also spent considerable effort building a coalition with the consumers that homecare workers serve. This was no easy task because the communities of elderly and people with disabilities

distrusted the union and feared the consequences of a strike. Moreover, some of the advocacy groups had been the chief proponents of the decentralized system of homecare services that put hiring and firing in the hands of the consumers. Yet as long as the consumers were deemed to be the employers, workers were implicitly pitted against care recipients, who in turn were unable to provide higher wages and benefits. Eventually, in what proved to be a critical realignment of forces, the union was able to unite workers and consumers with community groups to lobby county officials to establish a county-based government body as an employer-of-record and seek more funding for in-home services. The unity of workers and care recipients generated enough political strength that county officials were forced to take action (White 1999; Quan 1999).

The union's public policy strategies involved a series of legal initiatives that lay the basis for homecare workers to join unions, including both suits and legislative proposals. Most significantly, in 1993, the homecare workers coalition spearheaded state legislation that empowered counties to establish employers-of-record with the authority to bargain collectively with homecare worker unions, providing the necessary legal framework for counties such as Los Angeles to create a public authority. To date, the union and its allies have been able to establish county-based public authorities (which have become employers-of-record) in nine counties throughout the state. At every step of the way, policy advocacy has been accompanied by active mobilizations and street demonstrations by homecare workers, care recipients, and religious and community supporters.

Actual wage increases have been modest but significant. In San Francisco, homecare workers now earn more than \$9.00 an hour and have medical and dental benefits, as a result of the city's living wage ordinance, but this has not been replicated in the rest of the state. However, the first steps to stabilizing and restructuring the industry have been taken, as most public authorities provide worker training programs and a job placement registry based on seniority to help match available workers with care recipients. Higher wages and better benefits for homecare workers will only be achieved through state and local budget increases for in-home services, and will require ongoing partnering with coalitions of supporters to provide the political clout necessary to demand increased funding.

New Trends in Organizing

In recent years, unions in California have launched a number of new campaigns that incorporate some of the key strategies that led to the success of the homecare workers campaign. While their cumulative effect on the growth of union membership has yet to be proven, these new approaches are clearly having an impact. While it is very unlikely that the scale of success represented by the homecare workers will be repeated on a consistent basis, there are other large-scale organizing drives underway. Major multi-union organizing strategies are underway at both the Los Angeles and San Francisco International Airports, where tens of thousands of airport workers are employed by private businesses who lease or contract with the public agencies responsible for the management of the airports.⁵ Other large union campaigns include the Hotel Employee and Restaurant Employee union's unionization efforts in the Bay Area and Los Angeles, and the SEIU's efforts in the health care industry.

These campaigns are not unique, but rather represent ongoing efforts to revitalize the labor movement. This revitalization is based on the same approaches that led to success in the homecare workers campaign. They include a new interest and commitment to carrying out grassroots organizing among low-wage immigrant and minority workers, a new focus on building coalitions and organizations that increase labor's political clout, and using that political clout to implement a new arsenal of policy tools that improve the climate for organizing.

Organizing Immigrants

While once thought of as the hardest to organize, there is enough experience in California to convince many organizers that immigrants are often more militant and willing to organize than native-born workers (Milkman 2000b; Delgado 1993; DeFreitas 1993; Wells 2000). Throughout the 1990s, immigrants waged successful union campaigns in a range of low-wage immigrant dependent industries, including homecare, janitorial services, hotels construction, and even manufacturing. These campaigns account for a significant portion of the growth of union members in the state, and will eventually counteract the under-representation of immigrants in California unions documented above.

Immigrant organizing has shifted the center of gravity of the California labor movement from the traditional labor stronghold of Northern California to Los Angeles, the most common destination for new immigrants in the state and the nation. Milkman writes, “to the surprise of many observers, Los Angeles emerged in the 1990s as a key site of labor movement experimentation and as a showcase for successful immigrant organizing, an embryo of the broader revitalization effort that the new AFL-CIO leadership and its allies are currently attempting to jump-start.”

Successful immigrant organizing in Los Angeles is quite recent. While the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union (ILGWU) had been the first union in recent decades to seriously attempt to organize Latino immigrants in the late 1970s, it was more successful in training a new generation of Latino organizers and union leaders in Los Angeles than in increasing union membership among Latino immigrants (Milkman 2000b). The first large-scale breakthrough in immigrant organizing was the SEIU’s Justice for Janitors campaign, whose 1990 strike and victory marked the unionization of over 6,000 workers and was the largest private sector immigrant organizing success since the farmworkers in the 1970s. SEIU conducted a carefully orchestrated campaign to recapture previously unionized building services in many urban areas around the country, but their most spectacular success was clearly in Los Angeles, where Central American and Mexican workers, many of whom were undocumented and had political experience in their home country, re-energized the struggle. Quoting Milkman (2000b: 7-8):

It dramatically demonstrated not only the potential for galvanizing immigrant workers into a militant, solidaristic force for labor movement revitalization, but also the critical role of union leadership in that process. The Justice for Janitors campaign combined grassroots rank-and-file mobilization, on the one hand, with careful strategic planning on the part of experienced union leaders with access to extensive financial resources as well as expertise, on the other.... The organizers deliberately avoided the traditional NLRB electoral system in favor of an innovative approach that combined careful research into the power structure of the industry, strategic planning, and militant, media-savvy rank-and-file mobilization tactics.

The janitors were the first, but not the only immigrant organizing drive that occurred in the early 1980s. Shortly after the janitors’ victory, there was a five-month strike by Mexican drywall workers, who used their ties to their villages-of-origin to build sufficient solidarity to close down hundreds of job sites dispersed throughout Southern California, effectively halting residential construction. About 2,400 drywall workers doubled their wages and became union members when the contractors finally buckled and the Carpenters Union negotiated a contract for them (Milkman and Wong 2000a). Another well-known case was the wildcat strike at American Racing Equipment wheel factory, where 1,200 Latino workers voted to be represented by the Machinists and have received substantial pay and benefit gains in the ensuing years (Zabin 2000). Like the “drywalleros,” this campaign was spontaneously initiated by rank and file workers, rather than initiated and directed by the union, as was the case of the janitors. While the American Racing and drywall campaigns needed organized labor to bring a successful

conclusion to their efforts, the tremendous spontaneous militancy illustrates the willingness of immigrants to fight for their rights and take the risks necessary to unionize.

Throughout the 1990s immigrant organizing also occurred in other parts of the state, albeit on a small scale. The United Farm Workers refocused their efforts on organizing and had successful campaigns unionizing over a thousand workers on several rose, mushroom, and vegetable farms and vineyards in the San Joaquin Valley, the Central Coast region and the Napa/ Sonoma area. The Justice for Janitors campaign extended their success to the Sacramento area. The hotel workers in San Francisco and Oakland have organized in a number of hotels in the Bay Area, and the International Longshore Workers Union has organized immigrant workplaces in several waste and recycling facilities and a small manufacturing plant in the Bay Area.

These successes are remarkable because in addition to the unfavorable climate for organizing that faces native and foreign-born workers alike, undocumented immigrant workers face additional obstacles. Organizers cite the numerous ways employers use the threat of deportation as a weapon against undocumented workers who are seeking to organize into a union. While labor law in theory protects the rights of undocumented workers to join unions, it does not allow undocumented workers who are fired for union activity to be reinstated to their jobs. Thus, in practice it severely undermines undocumented workers' right to organize (Bacon 2000).

In a historic move, the AFL-CIO has made a new commitment to bolster the rights of immigrant workers. In February 2000 the AFL-CIO announced a bold new pro-immigrant policy initiative, calling for a broad amnesty for undocumented workers and an end to employer sanctions.⁶ This historic declaration marked a profound evolution inside labor, from a perception that immigrants undermine labor's power because they are willing to work for less and unwilling to join unions, to a perception that their militancy can be of major importance in labor's revitalization. Soon after the announced policy change, the AFL held hearings in several cities around the country to promote a new amnesty and a series of protections for immigrants seeking to unionize. In Los Angeles, 20,000 people showed up for the event, whereas less than 1,000 had participated in other cities. For the first time, labor was at the head of a large coalition of church-based groups, immigrant rights advocacy groups, Mexican and other immigrant hometown associations, and other community-based organizations.

Whether the AFL can parlay their new leadership role advocating for immigrant rights into large-scale organizing successes is yet to be seen. But California proves that immigrant organizing has great potential, if unions are willing to spend the resources to carry out comprehensive campaigns in immigrant-dependent industries.

Strengthening Labor's Political Power Through Coalitions and Institution-Building

One of the key components of successful unionization campaigns in recent California history is the judicious use of labor's political clout to influence elected officials and to shape local and state public policy. Labor has built political power by engaging in electoral politics and building coalitions with community allies.

First, central labor councils and the California Labor Federation have strengthened their traditional capacity to influence electoral politics by emphasizing grassroots electoral mobilization and attempting to promote accountability of elected leaders after they are in office. Los Angeles provides a powerful example once again. Under its first Latino leader, the Los Angeles County Federation of Labor- the second largest central labor council in the nation-has become an electoral force in determining outcomes for city, county, state, and federal elected offices. It has done so by using union money and harnessing a huge cadre of workers for voter registration and turn-out campaigns that are

largely directed at newly naturalized Latino immigrants. Although the focus on new citizens is strongest in the L.A. County Fed, other central labor councils and the California Labor Federation have had important and quite consistent electoral victories at the local and state level.

Second, labor has begun to reach across historical divisions to form coalitions with communities of color and various kinds of community-based organizations. The homecare case-where success could not have been achieved if unions had not joined forces with advocacy and community groups representing people with disabilities and the elderly- is again the preeminent example. But there are private sector cases as well. For example, in the early 1990s the Hotel Employees and Restaurant Employees (HERE) Local 2 won recognition and a contract at the Parc 55 in San Francisco by launching a full-blown boycott with substantial community support. In that case, although the owner of the hotel was a civic leader in the Asian community, the union won support from an important segment of the city's Asian community groups and elected officials who were concerned about the wages and working conditions of the largely immigrant hotel workers. That community support was strengthened during the Marriott campaign, when the union linked demands for union neutrality and for hiring of local residents. Community allies continue to be a pillar of support for that on-going campaign.

The California labor movement has also increased its political influence through the creation of five new labor-linked non-profit research and education organizations: Working Partners USA, affiliated with the South Bay Labor Council in San Jose, the Los Angeles Alliance for a New Economy, the Center for Policy Initiatives linked to the San Diego Central Labor Council, the East Bay Alliance for a Sustainable Economy, started by the HERE union in Oakland, and the new California Works Foundation created by the California Labor Federation just this year. These institutions have been instrumental in constructing new relationships with community organizations, particularly with groups representing or advocating for immigrants and people of color. They have led living wage coalitions, created faith-based labor support committees, and have attracted substantial amounts of foundation funding to work on economic justice issues. They have produced research that highlights the problem of income polarization in the state and used that research to influence public opinion and help shape policy debates among elected officials.

Using Political Power to Support Organizing

Local unions, labor federations and labor-linked nonprofits have not only increased labor's influence over local and state elected officials, but also have begun to use this influence to help organizing drives. This has been very successful in Los Angeles, as Milkman (2000) notes:

L.A. labor has parlayed its political clout, in turn, to obtain leverage in ongoing worker organizing efforts. The April 2000 janitors strike once again provides the shining example. The SEIU launched the strike with official endorsements from 48 local elected officials, and by the end had won support from politicians across the board - including members of both houses of the state legislature, the entire city council (some members of which were arrested for civil disobedience in support of the strike), and even Republican mayor Richard Riordan. The strike became a litmus test of loyalty to the formidable County Fed. for L.A.'s politicians, and above all for aspiring Latino politicians.

But unions have gone beyond the use of politicians to garner media coverage, behind the scenes pressure and public support for organizing and contract campaigns. The unfavorable climate for organizing unions in private sector firms has led unions in California and elsewhere to fight for legislation at the local and state level that helps lower employer resistance to unionization in specific industries. In the case of homecare workers described above, SEIU successfully lobbied to create public

authorities at the county level which formalized the status of homecare workers as public employees, where employer resistance is much less fierce. Home health care workers are exceptional because their entire wage bill is ultimately paid with public dollars. However, unions and their allies have devised strategies to improve the climate for organizing for a number of other private sector businesses over which the government has some influence.

The most visible new strategy in this arena is the living wage movement, which ties public money to labor standards, including the right to organize. Labor, and particularly the labor-linked nonprofit organizations, have led successful living wage campaigns in both southern and northern California, improving wages for thousands of workers employed by businesses who contract with local governments, receive business subsidies, or are tenants on land owned by municipalities or public authorities. Living wage policies are part of a larger union strategy to create labor standards for employers who contract with, receive assistance from, or operate on land owned by local government entities.

In San Francisco, which passed a living wage ordinance in July 2000, more than 22,000 low-wage workers have or will experience wage increases to a minimum of \$9.00 per hour, rising to \$10.00 per hour in 12-18 months, with a cost of living adjustment in future years. In Los Angeles, another estimated 20,00 low-wage workers will receive increases to \$7.25 per hour with family benefits and \$8.50 without benefits when the living wage ordinance is fully implemented. In other cities, such as San Jose, Oakland, Pasadena and others, where the number of workers employed by city contractors is small, the ordinances have affected much smaller numbers of workers.

Living wage campaigns have supported organizing in a variety of ways. The simple moral appeal of the idea that workers deserve a living wage has allowed unions to build durable coalitions that can then influence local politics to make conditions more favorable for unions. In Los Angeles, the living wage coalition has been able to get involved in the approval process for new real estate developments and to directly raise the issue of wages and working conditions. In several cases, the coalition helped developers obtain the necessary municipal approvals in exchange for compliance with the living wage standard and union neutrality in the event of an organizing drive.

At the San Francisco Airport, where a living wage standard was passed for security personnel, the airport commission gave unions the responsibility of informing workers about their rights under the new policy. This has been a tremendous aid for the union organizing campaign because it has allowed organizers to approach unorganized workers in an official capacity. As part of this plan, the airport allowed organizers to wear airport security badges and full access to employee work and break sites. Thus, the living wage policy gave the union legitimacy with and access to the unorganized workers on airport property.

The San Francisco Airport organizing also has been facilitated by card-check language that the airport commission has now placed in all its leases with businesses operating on airport property. Card-check agreements allow unions to bypass the cumbersome National Labor Relations Board elections and gain recognition when more than 50 percent of the workers sign union cards. The precedent for this language is an ordinance introduced in San Francisco in 1997 which requires new hotels and restaurants built on city property to avoid labor strife by agreeing to card check language (Gordon 1997).

This set of local policies are all ways that unions can encourage unionization in a certain set of private firms-companies that sell goods and services to local governments or public agencies, lease property from them, are licensed or regulated by them, or receive subsidies or tax breaks from them. While by no means the only type of public policy that unions have used to improve their ability to organize, these are important new strategies that have yielded some success.

Conclusion

After many years of decline, California unions have engaged in aggressive new strategies to organize workers. Can these new approaches overcome the challenges of a new workforce and a new economy, and thus reverse the decades of decline in unionization that the numbers so starkly show?

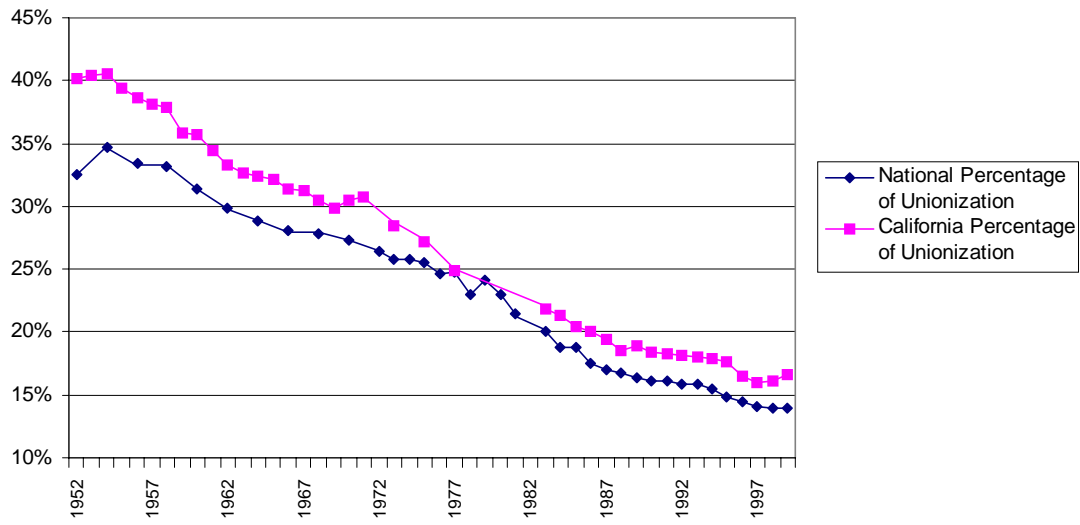
At the heart of labor's revitalization in California is the powerful mix of the awakening militancy among the mushrooming low-wage, largely immigrant workforce, the growing political strength of labor in local and state elected bodies, and the use of that political clout to improve the climate for organizing. Certainly, the growing focus on immigrants has the potential to reverse the persistent under-representation of immigrants among California union members and thereby vastly increase the numbers of union members in California. California is the testing ground for immigrant organizing for the nation, and success has been significant, albeit still at a relatively small scale.

However, the California labor movement has hardly begun to tackle the challenges of the new economy. Efforts to organize the engines of the California economy—industries related to information technology and biotechnology - have been few and far between. One exception is the effort by Working Partnerships, affiliated with the South Bay Labor Council, to organize the temporary workers in the Silicon Valley by simultaneously creating its own temp agency and organizing the workers within it. This is part of their larger strategy to adapt key features of craft unionism, such as portable benefits, union-centered job training, and control over job access via hiring halls, to the contemporary low-wage service sector. This experiment is still in its infancy, but represents an attempt to explicitly address the challenges of the new economy.

California unions have also had limited success organizing in large swaths of the private service and manufacturing sectors over which local governments have little leverage and thus the family of living wage-type policies are ineffective. These industries have either never been unionized or have been de-unionized due to outsourcing and subcontracting. The notable success in this arena that stands as an exception to the rule is the Justice for Janitors campaign, which we have noted due to the tremendous militancy of its immigrant workers. Another key to the success of the campaign was the union's capacity to exert pressure on the janitors' immediate employers the building services contractors by moving up the commodity chain to negotiate directly with building owners who employ the contractors.

Overall, unions are operating in a national legal and political environment that presents tremendous obstacles to organizing. Thus, even in cases where unions have shifted resources to organizing and committed to organizing new demographic groups and new or changing industries, winning is no easy feat. Since national policies are so problematic, unions are developing new strategies to lower employer resistance, often using their political clout to pass local or state legislation to improve the climate for organizing. This strategy takes tremendous resources, because it means fighting for a more evenly balanced labor relations' environment in every jurisdiction or industry in which unions are trying to organize. Without a major shift in the climate for organizing, unions in California as well as nationally face an uphill battle.

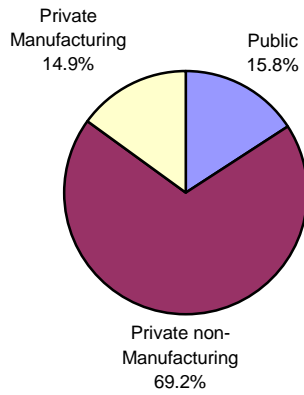
Figure 1: Union Density in California and the U.S., 1952-99



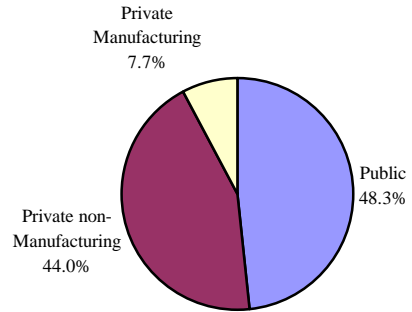
Sources: 1952-77 from *The Decline of Organized Labor in the United States*, table 1; and *Union of Labor in California, 1987*, table 2; 1978-99 from *The Bureau of National Affairs, Inc. Union Membership and Earnings Data Book 1993-2000*.

Figure 2: Sectoral Composition of Union Members

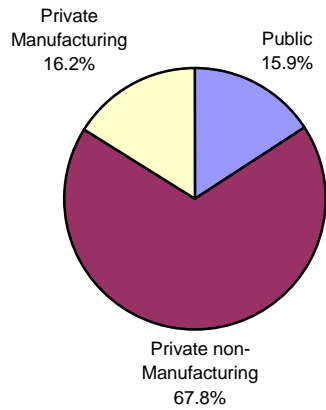
All Workers by Sector: California



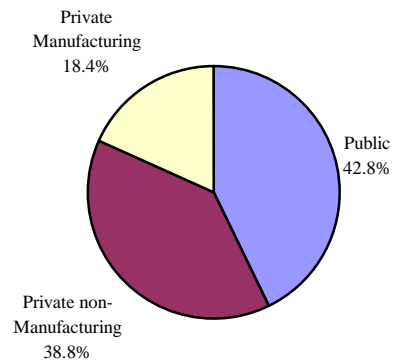
Union Members by Sector: California



All Workers by Sector: U.S.

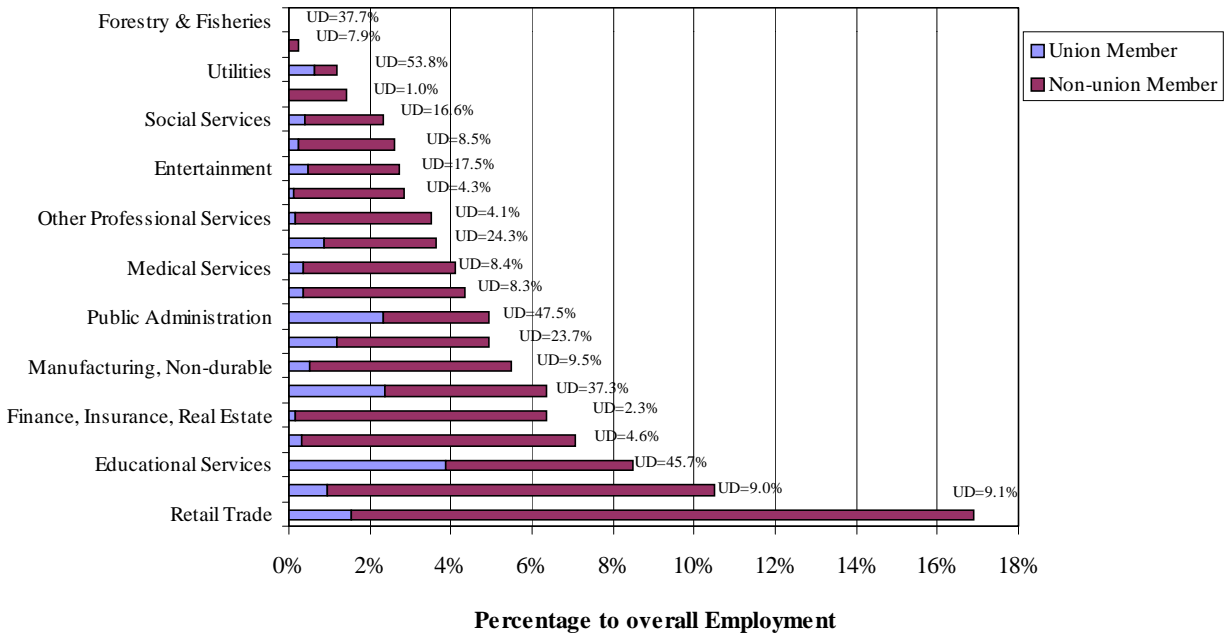


Union Members by Sector: U.S.



Source: CPS data, 1999, Hirsch and Macpherson.

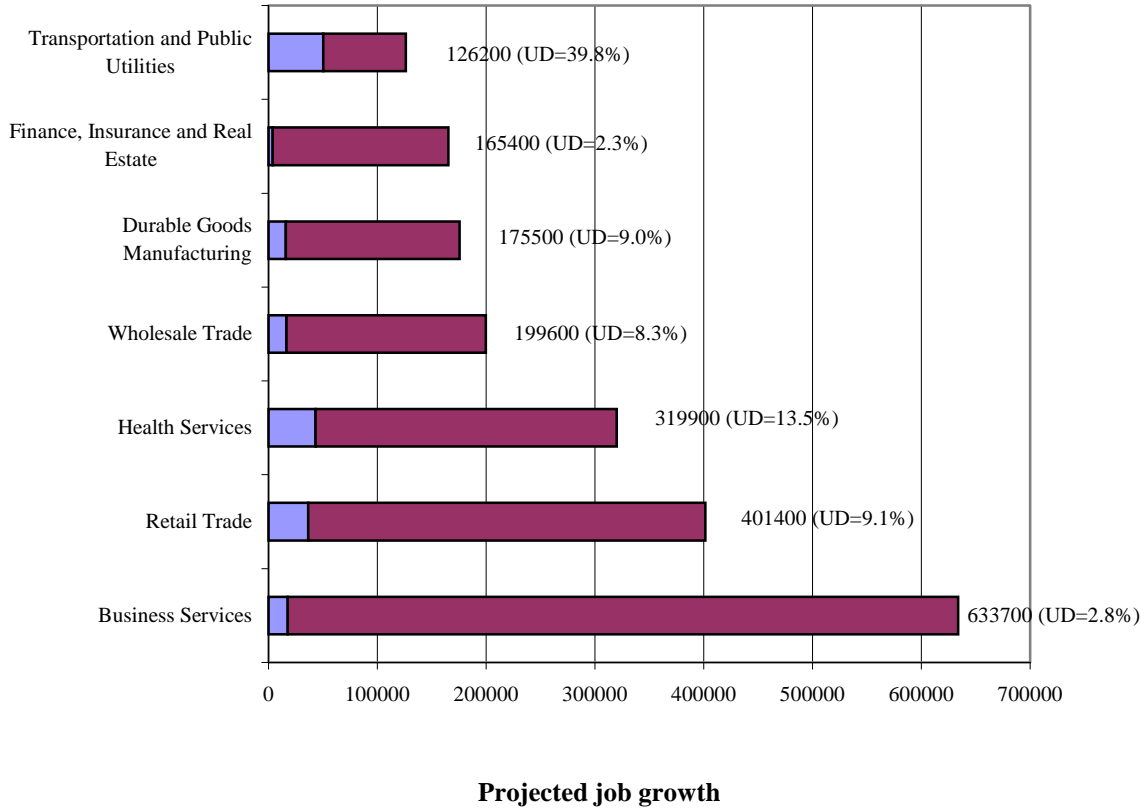
Figure 3: Distribution of Employment by Detailed Sector with % union membership



This figure shows the distribution of employment in California by detailed economic sector, with the percentage of union members and non-members in each sector. UD is the union density for the sector.

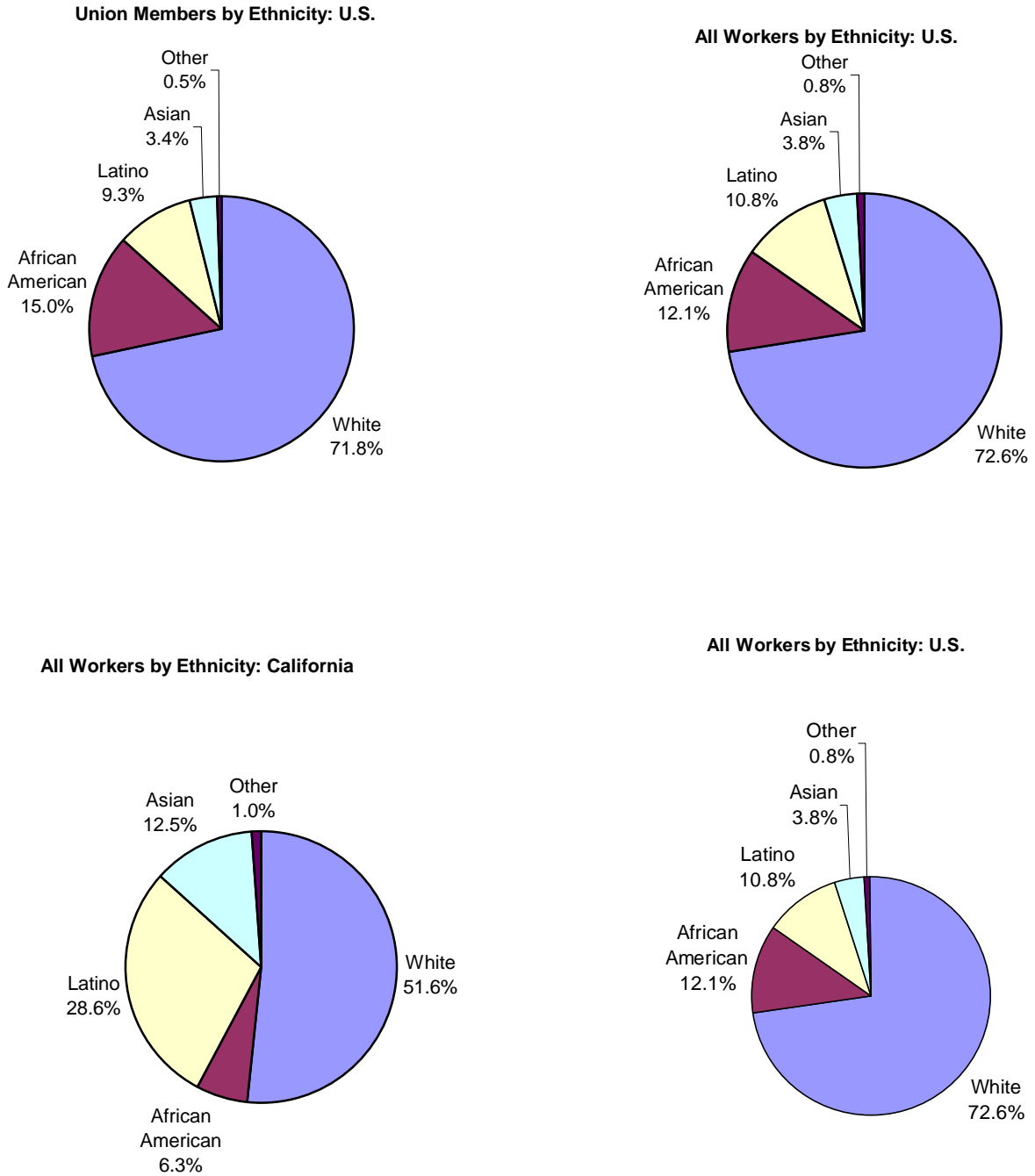
Sources: Reich and Hall data set, 1997-1999 CPS outgoing rotation file. Recalculated according to CPS's Major Industry Recodes at <http://www.bls.census.gov/cps/bindcd.htm>

Figure 4: Union Density in Sectors with Projected Employment Growth over 100,000 between 1998 and 2008



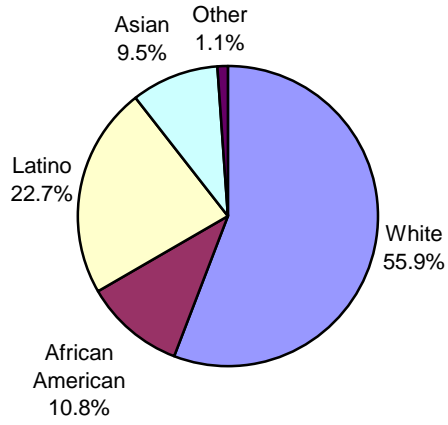
Sources: Employment growth data from labor market information at [http://www.calmis.cahwnet.gov/file/indproj/cal\\$tb2.htm](http://www.calmis.cahwnet.gov/file/indproj/cal$tb2.htm). Union density data from Reich and Hall data set, 1997-1999 CPS outgoing rotation file.

Figure 5: Ethnic Composition of Union Members

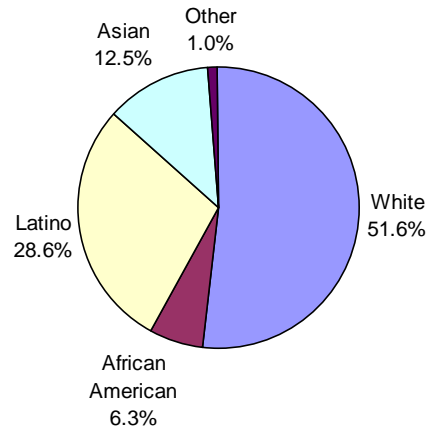


Sources: California data from Reich and Hall data set, 1997-1999 CPS outgoing rotation file; U.S. data from CPS data, 1999; Hirsch and Macpherson, various years.

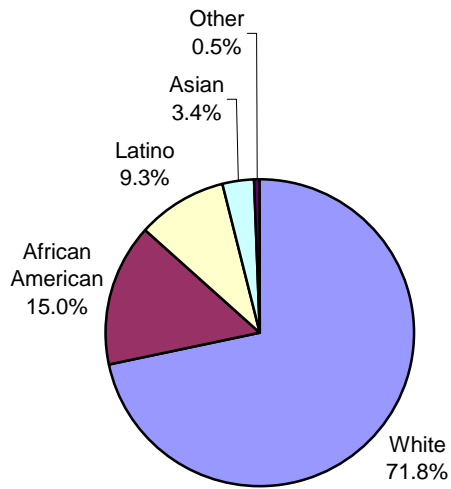
Union Members by Ethnicity: California



All Workers by Ethnicity: California



Union Members by Ethnicity: U.S.



All Workers by Ethnicity: U.S.

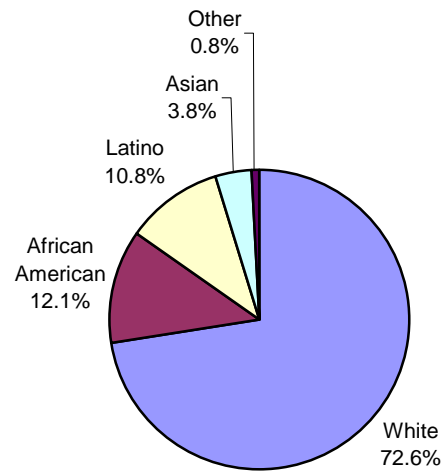
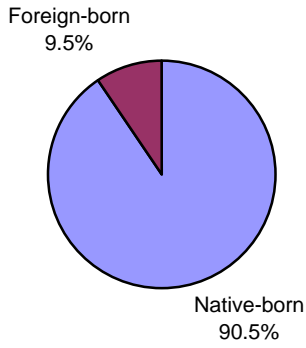
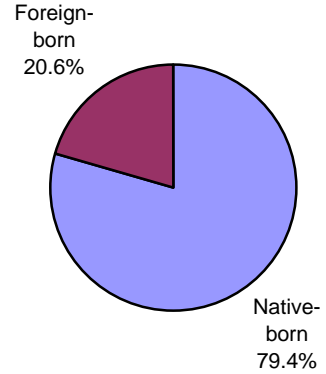


Figure 6: Native and Foreign-born Union Members

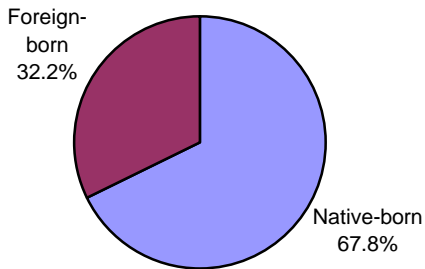
**Union Members by Foreign/Native-born:
U.S.**



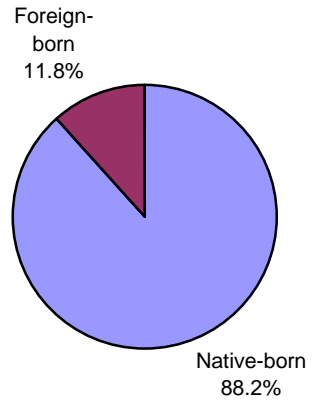
**Union Members by Foreign/Native-born:
California**



**All Workers by Foreign/Native-born:
California**



All Workers by Foreign/Native-born: U.S.



Sources: California data from Reich and Hall data set, 1997-1999 CPS outgoing rotation file; U.S. data from CPS data, 1999, Hirsch and Macpherson.

Table 1: Union Wage Premiums in California

	Union	Non-union	Union/non-union
Men	\$20.60	\$17.50	1.18
Women	\$18.70	\$14.00	1.34
White	\$21.70	\$18.90	1.15
African American	\$18.20	\$13.80	1.33
Asian	\$18.30	\$16.30	1.12
Latino	\$15.80	\$10.50	1.50

Source: Reich and Hall data set, 1997-1999 CPS outgoing rotation file.

Table 2: Union Wage Premiums by Education

	Union	Non-union	Union/non-union
High school or less	\$14.94	\$10.28	1.45
More than 12-year schooling	\$21.25	\$19.07	1.11

Source: Reich and Hall data set, 1997-1999 CPS outgoing rotation file.

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Endnotes:

¹ Data on unionization is quite limited, since most official sources do not ask questions about union membership. Since the California Department of Industrialization ceased its yearly survey of unions, the main governmental source for information about unionization in California and the nation is the Current Population Survey, which is used for this overview. Two sources for union data are used, both derived from the CPS. For the national data and the most aggregated California data, we have used data from the Bureau of National Affairs (Hirsch and Macphersohn, 1997. For the disaggregated California data we have used a data set provided by Reich and Hall, 2000 (see chapter in this volume for more details) that used the eighth month of the survey, commonly known as the outgoing rotation, and combined individuals for the years 1997-1999.

² Changes in data collection make comparisons difficult: the BLS series for the United States ends in 1978, while the California data was not collected after 1989.

³ The categories are slightly different than the previous graph because the CPS density information was reaggregated to match the categories used by the California EDD's employment growth projections.

⁴ This information was gathered from press accounts and communication with key union leaders, and is not a systematic overview of union growth. Union growth is the sum of new organizing victories and the growth of employment in unionized sectors, minus the loss of union members from closure or decline of unionized firms and union decertifications.

⁵ At SFO for example, the campaign has organized 800 workers in 7 companies as of the date of this writing, and has on-going campaigns that target 3,000 more workers.

⁶ Employer sanctions are part of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA), and make it illegal for employers to hire undocumented workers. This provision undermines the legal remedies for undocumented workers who are fired for union activity because they cannot be reinstated.