



MARCH 2019

Labor Takes the High Road:

How Unions Make Western New York More Prosperous and Equitable

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





Healthcare workers meeting to prepare for collective bargaining.



Musicians in Rehearsal, Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra



Teacher and Students, Art Class,
Lafayette International High School

Snapshot of the 16 Million Union Members in the United States Today

46%

are women

36%

are people of color

42%

have a college degree or more

53%

work in health, education,
or public administration

Introduction: Unions are Vital to a Healthy Community

The labor movement makes Western New York a better place for all its residents. Research demonstrates conclusively that unions raise wages and benefits for the region’s workers, and they make workplaces more safe, healthy, and fair – reducing turnover and offering workers a voice. But the impact of organized labor reaches far beyond individual workplaces. Through community service, civic engagement, worker assistance, workforce development, and public policy advocacy, union members build the “high road” that makes the entire community more prosperous, united, and inclusive.

Two overarching aspects of unions make them uniquely important to a healthy region. First, they are democratic institutions, with leaders elected by members; this makes them particularly responsive to the needs and goals of working people, and it also makes them training grounds for democratic participation in other areas of public life. Second, they are intensely collaborative, constantly seeking win-win resolutions. Union members want the companies where they work to succeed, and they want their local economies to grow and flourish. In a time where many Americans are concerned about polarization, the lack of civic cohesion, and the vulnerability of the working class, unions have an unmatched ability to bring people together around the shared values of equality, justice, and opportunity.

Organized labor is one of the most important civic institutions in Western New York, with over 140,000 union members in the eight-county region. In the Buffalo-Niagara metropolitan area alone, one out of every five workers is a union member, for a total of 101,240 members. Of those members, 57 percent are public servants, while 43 percent work in the private sector.



Firefighter, Buffalo Fire Department

“When union membership decreases, the wages decrease, and when wages decrease, the community as a whole hurts, so, as nonprofits and social services, we need to pick up that slack. As wages go down, the need for social services goes up. If individuals are being paid a living wage, they’re able to provide for themselves.”

Chrissy Cassata, director of labor engagement for the United Way of Buffalo and Erie County

Union Density in Buffalo-Niagara and New York State

New York boasts the highest union density of any state, with 23.8 percent of workers in unions, compared to a national rate of 10.7 percent. Buffalo-Niagara’s union density (19.9 percent) is a lower than the state average; it is lower than the unionization rate in Albany (32.2 percent), Syracuse (23.7 percent), and New York City (21.8 percent), but higher than that in Rochester (17.9 percent).

Unions Raise Wages and Benefits for WNY Workers

Our research on wages and benefits for Buffalo-Niagara workers shows substantial advantages correlated to union membership.

WAGES

Men covered by union contracts have a median annual wage of \$64,000, whereas men who are not covered have a median wage of \$34,000. For women, the gap is smaller but still dramatic: \$40,000 compared to \$26,000.

FULL-TIME WORK

79.8 percent of union members work full time, compared to 71.8 percent of non-union workers.

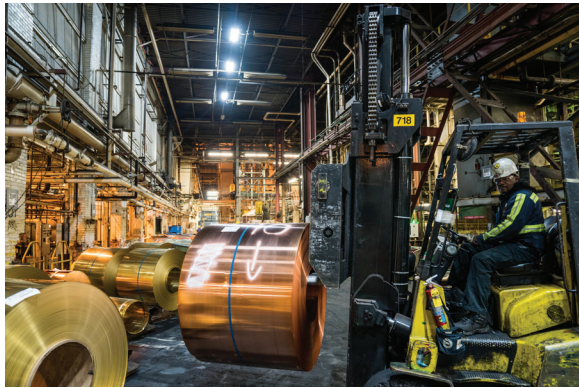
HEALTH CARE

97.1 percent of workers covered by union contracts have health care coverage, compared to 89.2 percent of workers not covered.

PENSIONS

77 percent of union members have pensions, compared to 39.8 percent of non-union workers.

Importantly, the union wage gap is particularly strong among low-wage workers, and unions have been shown to raise wages even for non-members, by “raising the floor” of wages in a given sector or job market.



United Steelworker at Aurubis Buffalo Factory
(Formerly American Brass)

“When I look at workplaces that have really good health and safety programs, that was achieved because of worker input, and that worker input happened only because there was collective bargaining.”

*Nellie Brown, certified industrial hygienist,
Cornell University*

Job Quality and Solidarity at Work

HEALTH AND SAFETY

Workplace fatalities are significantly lower in unionized workplaces and in more unionized states.

In a survey of Buffalo’s low-wage workers, 58 percent reported at least one potential health and safety violation on their job; thus, the work of unions remains critical to keeping Western New Yorkers safe on the job.

FAIR TREATMENT

Unions help ensure fair treatment by negotiating for fair procedures and then by helping workers to understand and use their rights to fair treatment. Wage and hour violations are shockingly common in the United States. Failure to pay the minimum wage, for example, costs workers over \$15 billion per year. In a 2017 survey of Buffalo workers, 58.9 percent of low-wage workers reported at least one wage and hour violation. National research shows that workers not covered by unions are twice as likely to be victims of this abuse.

Unions reduce racial discrimination on the job. African-Americans have higher unionization rates than whites, in part because black workers value the protection from discrimination that unionized jobs offer. In fact, workers of color are 2.4 to 3.5 times more likely to vote for a union in an organizing drive.

REDUCING TURNOVER

A study of Western New York found that the turnover rate of workers was only 6.2 percent among unionized employers, compared to 17.6 percent at non-union employers.

MUTUAL ASSISTANCE AND SOLIDARITY

Harder to quantify, but no less important, are the myriad ways in which union members look out for one another and assist each other’s families in times of need, and the importance of belonging to a broad-based civic movement dedicated to democracy, equality, and solidarity.

A good example is CSEA’s Sunshine Fund; union members contribute voluntarily to the fund, and then have the ability to apply to it for aid after an emergency such as a house fire, a death in the family, or unexpected medical bills.



Retired Sheet Metal Worker Volunteering to Replicate an Historic Lighting Fixture for Buffalo's Central Terminal

“We don’t consider ourselves just a labor organization; we’re also a community outreach organization. We fund toy drives and food drives, not only to help our own members but to help the community.”

*George Harrigan, Principal Officer,
Teamsters Local 449*

Unions Build Community

States with higher levels of unionization have lower poverty levels, higher average incomes, lower workplace deaths, higher educational outcomes, and higher pension and health insurance coverage, even for workers not in unions.

COMMUNITY SERVICE

Union members volunteer their time, expertise, and donations to hundreds of causes in Western New York. In 2017, the United Way of Buffalo and Erie County raised \$14.6 million in workplace contributions, including 150 workplaces with union members.

WORKER ASSISTANCE

Western New York Center for Occupational Safety and Health (WNYCOSH) was founded in 1979 by a group of labor, environmental, and public health activists. WNYCOSH has provided direct training, education and technical assistance to thousands of workers in Western New York, helping them to identify, evaluate, and control hazards in their workplaces. WNYCOSH also runs a Worker Center, which focuses especially on low-wage, temporary, refugee, and other vulnerable workers in the community, serving them with worker rights trainings, free legal clinics, and help organizing around workplace issues. Labor leaders were critical in establishing the Center for Occupational Health and Medicine at Erie County Medical Center in 2015. The Center prevents work-related illnesses and injuries through increased awareness and health education, early diagnosis and treatment.

VOTING

Union members are more likely to vote than non-members; among public sector workers, the difference is 74.1 percent (union) to 69.9 percent (non-union); in the private sector it is 56.3 percent to 51.7 percent. Unions are one of the few groups that increase voting among lower-income people. They mobilize “people power” on a large scale through voter education and get-out-the-vote efforts.

WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Unions support vital workforce development: training workers so that the regional economy does not suffer from skills gaps or mismatches; aiding disadvantaged residents to get the skills they need to find family-sustaining jobs; building career ladders so that workers can advance within companies and sectors to increasingly skilled jobs; and maximizing productivity, health, and safety through proper training. The Workforce Development Institute, founded by unions, plays a critical role. In 2017 WDI funded 338 projects across the state, including 30 in Western New York.



Researchers, Roswell Park Cancer Institute

Acknowledgments

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For the full report, and full acknowledgments, please visit ppgbuffalo.org.

Unions Support High Road Public Policies

Labor organizations in Western New York have a long and proud history of fighting for civil rights, environmental protections, public health, public education, and responsible economic development. The region's unions have lent crucial support to recent policy advances on issues such as:

- Living wages;
- Minimum wage increases;
- First source hiring policies;
- Gender equity;
- Safe patient handling;
- Safe staffing for quality care;
- “Just transitions” for workers and communities affected by power plant closings; and
- Reforms to wasteful economic development policies.

Conclusion: The Role of Unions is More Important Than Ever

Western New York has seen a surge in economic development and a major boost to civic morale. Buffalo's waterfront, medical corridor, and downtown have attracted large public and private investments, and the Buffalo Billion initiatives have brought new life to old industrial sites on Buffalo's south and east sides. And yet severe challenges remain: middle wage jobs continue to vanish, and the city of Buffalo has the fourth highest child poverty rate in the nation. One third of the region's workforce works in an occupation with a median wage of less than \$15 per hour, and too many workers, lacking the advantage of union membership, are lacking the basic components of a good job: full-year, full-time employment; fixed schedules; health care; paid sick days and vacations; workplace safety; pensions; and freedom from exploitation.

The research gathered in this report demonstrates that organized labor is vital to forging a sustainable and equitable path forward. Western New York's unions have proven that they raise benefits and wages, improve working conditions, invest in their communities, increase civic engagement, and promote sound public policies. Labor builds the high road – the road to shared prosperity in a thriving region.



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