

POLICY BRIEF

An electronic publication of
The Allegheny Institute for Public Policy

May 30, 2006

Volume 6, Number 26

Overly Powerful Public Sector Unions

By 2005, Pennsylvania union membership had fallen to just 13.8 percent of the workforce in Pennsylvania, a 50 percent decline over the last 20 years. The number of union members stood at 752,000, down from 1.2 million in 1983--a remarkable development in light of the 1.1 million increase in the state's job count. Forty years ago almost 40 percent of Pennsylvania employees were covered by union contracts, ranking Pennsylvania among the highest unionized states in the nation.

The entire decline in union membership has occurred in the private sector where union membership has plummeted from 855,000 to 402,000 over the last 20 years or so despite a rise of a million jobs between 1983 and 2005. As a result, the percentage of private sector workers who are covered by a collective bargaining agreement has plunged to just 8.5 percent, down from 23.2 percent in 1983. In large part this reflects the dramatic slide in manufacturing workers, with membership totals falling 72 percent, who were very heavily unionized along with significant gains in service sector jobs that are not as heavily unionized.

Meanwhile, public sector union membership shows very little net change over the past 22 years, rising from 340,00 to 350,000. Membership has fluctuated significantly over the period, falling to a low of 289,000 in the aftermath of the deep recession of the early 1980s and climbing as high as 389,000 in 2001 following a fairly strong period of economic gains in the state. Still, public sector union members now account for just under half of all union members in the state even though public jobs represent only 13 percent of total employment.

In recent years, public sector union membership has declined in actual count and as a percent of total public sector employment dipping from a peak of 57 percent in 2001 to 48.5 percent last year. It is too early to tell if the recent falloff is cyclical or marks the beginning of a more permanent pattern.

In any case, it is clear that the private sector's trend of diminishing union membership is firmly in place while public sector membership appears to be treading water.

Unfortunately, in Pennsylvania the laws designed to protect union privileges and power show no sign of changing to reflect the state's new economic landscape. No Right to

Work bill seems ready to pass the legislature, at least not any time soon. No elimination of prevailing wage requirements on public construction projects is on the horizon. No elimination of the right of teachers and transit workers to strike seems likely for the foreseeable future. In short, 350,000 public sector union members, barely 6 percent of state jobholders and 4 percent of the adult population, have the political clout to drive labor policy in Pennsylvania long past the time when it has become clear that the policies that are in place to make them safe in their jobs with great wages and benefits are creating substantial harm to the state's economy, now and in the future.

It is doubly unfortunate that the private sector unions continue to provide unquestioning support to the public sector unions even though the special privileges and powers of the public unions are crippling the private sector's ability to grow.

But even including the private sector employees, total union membership is only 14 percent of the work force and maybe nine or ten percent of the adult population. The obvious question is: How does such a small share of the electorate command such control over the direction of public policies? One can only conclude that it is either because they have a lot of non-union people supporting them or they have managed to cow those who would challenge them. Either way, Pennsylvania's business climate is not being allowed to improve as it must if the state is to realize its potential and quit losing its young people to other states.

Jake Haulk, Ph.D. President

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