

Union numbers down nationwide;

big jumps in Ariz., Washington

The number of unionists declined by 326,000 from 2005 to 2006, to 12 percent of the U.S. labor force, the Bureau of Labor Statistics said. But there were big jumps of 52,000 in Arizona and 26,000 in Washington, a small rise in Minnesota, and increases in 17 states, including the "red states" of Montana and both Carolinas.

BLS reported the nation had 15.359 million union members last year, down from 15.685 million in 2005. Unions represented another 1.5 million people who were not members, in 2006. Many of them pay "agency fees," but some do not. Unionization among public sector workers, at 36.2 percent, was five times that of private workers, 7.4 percent.

"The most important thing the numbers show is how critical it is to pass the Employee Free Choice Act," to level the playing field between workers and management, AFL-CIO Organizing Director Stewart Acuff told Press Associates Union News Service in a telephone interview. EFCA would "restore the freedom to form unions without interference, retaliation and intimidation" by employers, he added.

Data from an AFL-CIO-commissioned poll show 53 percent of non-union non-supervisory workers would join unions if they could without employer interference. "Sixty million would vote for unions and 15-1/2 million are in unions. That gap between the numbers is due" to employer interference and intimidation, Acuff added.

BLS surveyed 60,000 households, including 15,000 for wage data, meaning there could be errors when compared to reality, it said. But it said the chances of identical results if the whole country was polled—instead of the larger survey—are far over 90 percent.

But BLS also warned that 2005 and 2006 union

membership data "are not strictly comparable" due to "revised population controls" in its survey. It called the effect of the new controls "unknown," but noted that, for example, those controls were instituted in Jan. 2006 and using them cut Dec. 2005 employment by 123,000 people.

The most-densely unionized field was local government—especially Fire Fighters and other protective services, plus teachers—at 41.9 percent. More than one-fifth (23.2 percent) of transportation and utility workers were unionists last year as were 17.6 percent of construction and extraction workers and 20.7 percent of telecom workers.

Reflecting part of CWA's recent card-check organizing successes, the number of unionized telecom workers rose by 11,000 in one year, to 245,000, though the percentage declined. Factories had 1.827 million union workers, or 11.7 percent.

That's down almost 200,000 workers and 1.3 percent in one year.

In almost every occupation and demographic, unionists increased their advantage in earnings over their non-union colleagues, BLS said. The median weekly earning figure for unionists nationwide—that point at which half are above and half are below—was \$833 in 2006, up by \$32 (3.85%) in one year. The median for non-union workers rose by \$20 (3.1%), to \$642 in 2006. The median for all workers also rose by \$20, to \$671.

Unionists had an edge median earnings in factories (unionists \$755, non-unionists \$692), construction (unionists \$969, non-unionists \$610) and almost everywhere else in 2006. Retail trade was the sole occupation where the median for unionists slid (\$7) while the median for non-unionists rose (\$5).

That still left the edge at \$65 a week (\$583-\$518) over non-union retail workers, who include Wal-Mart's workers.

And while there is still an earnings gap between men and women, it is not only smaller for unionists than non-unionists, but it's shrinking for unionists. BLS said the median for all working men was \$743 last year, up by \$21. For all working women, it was \$600, up by \$15. That meant the median wage for a working woman last year was 80.7 percent of that of a working man, down from

But the story was different for unionized workers. Unionized working men had median weekly earnings of \$887 last year, up \$30 in one year, while unionized working women had median weekly earnings of \$758, up \$32. The median for union women in 2006 was 85.4 percent of the median for men, up from 84.7 percent in 2005.

As usual, unionists were concentrated in the Northeast, the Midwest and on the Pacific Coast. Just under half of all unionists lived in six states: California (2.27 million, down 150,000), New York

(1.98 million, down 109,000), Illinois, 931,000, up 4,000), Michigan (842,000, down 38,000), New Jersey (770,000, down 21,000) and Pennsylvania (753,000, down 8,000). Those states have one-third of all U.S. workers.