

# The State of Labor in New Jersey, 2021-2023

A Profile of Organized Labor in the Garden State

**A Report from the Labor Education Action Research Network**

*By: Joseph van der Naald & Todd E. Vachon\**

**MAY 2024**

\* Direct all correspondence to: [todd.vachon@rutgers.edu](mailto:todd.vachon@rutgers.edu)



# Executive Summary

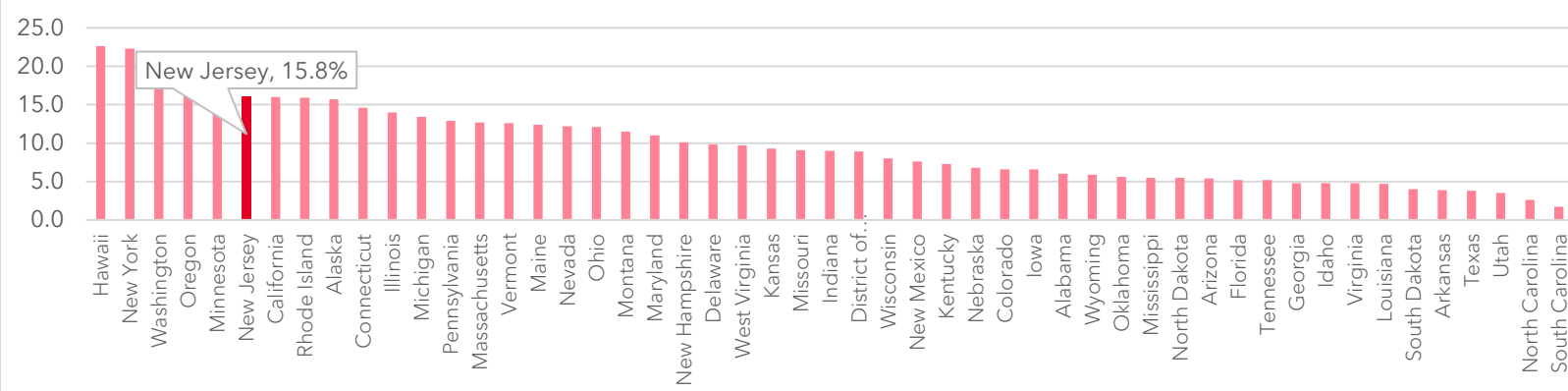
## Key Findings

- **New Jersey's unionization rate currently stands at 15.8% based on the 2021-23 average.** Our findings show that overall unionization among all workers in the state declined slightly from 16.1% in the previous three-year period (which included the COVID shutdown)
- **Private sector density increased by about 1%, while public sector density declined by almost 2%,** since the last report in 2022.
- **Union members are roughly evenly split between the private and public sectors,** due in part to a slight increase in private sector density since the last report (2022).
- There appears to be a **blue collar-white collar divide** when looking at unionization trends in the public vs. private sector. Most private-sector union members are located in production occupations, while most public-sector union members are found in professional occupations.
- Public administration (52.7%), transportation and utilities (32.6%), education and health services (26.1%), and construction (21%) are the most highly unionized industries in New Jersey.
- Education instruction and library (56.1%), protective service (44.4%), and installation, maintenance and repair (31.9%) are the most highly unionized occupations in the state.
- Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations saw gains in unionization since the previous report issued in 2022, up from 17% to over 20%, as did education, instruction and library, up from 53% to 56%.
- Similar to national trends, **Black workers remain more likely to be union members than white and other non-white workers.** Black men have the highest union density among all workers in the state. Private-sector union membership remains slightly more diverse than in the public sector.
- On average, full-time unionized workers in the state make about 11% more in weekly wages than non-unionized workers. **Hispanic workers as well as women reap some of the greatest economic benefits from having a union in their workplace.**
- In New Jersey, there have been 26 total strikes since 2021, with at least 10 that involved 100 workers or more. The stoppage at Rutgers University in 2023 was the largest recent strike, involving 9,000 faculty, staff, and graduate workers, followed by the 2023 nurses strike at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital.

# The State of Labor in New Jersey

By Joseph van der Naald & Todd E. Vachon

**Figure 1. Total Union Density (%) by U.S. State**



Union density in the United States in 2023 stands at about 10% of all workers, with the rate in the private sector at just 6.0%. Public sector workers have fared better and maintain a unionization rate of 32% nationally. Looking at Figure 1, we can see that New Jersey workers have maintained higher unionization rates than most other states, with total union density at 15.8%—making it the sixth most unionized state in the U.S.<sup>i</sup>

The current report will explore recent trends in unionization in the state of New Jersey. Unlike the previous State of Labor report which captured a tumultuous period in the U.S. labor market—the year leading up to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and the year of the shutdown—the current report captures the period of labor unrest during the COVID-19 recovery, which was characterized by increased organizing activity, labor militancy, a tight labor market, and rising inflation. In the wake of the pandemic, many workers in essential industries refused to accept what they had deemed to be inadequate jobs, or they had opted to exit the labor market all together. Citing health and safety concerns, low pay, and a lack of respect, workers who remained in the labor force initiated organizing drives in service and retail industries at levels not seen in recent history. Yet still others with already unionized shops opted to engage in work stoppages to achieve much-needed wage gains during a period of exceptionally high inflation.

To create a snapshot of the current state of labor in the Garden State, this report uses a series of data comprised of the 36 months starting in January 2021 and ending in December 2023.<sup>ii</sup> This approach provides a large enough sample to look at the overall trends in unionization across the entire period as well as to make comparisons within sub-categories, including race and gender composition of union members. As with previous State of Labor reports, data is drawn from the U.S. Current Population Survey (CPS) Outgoing Rotation Group data. The report will outline unionization rates, including by sector, industry, occupation, and key demographic characteristics.<sup>iii</sup>

# UNIONIZATION BY SECTOR

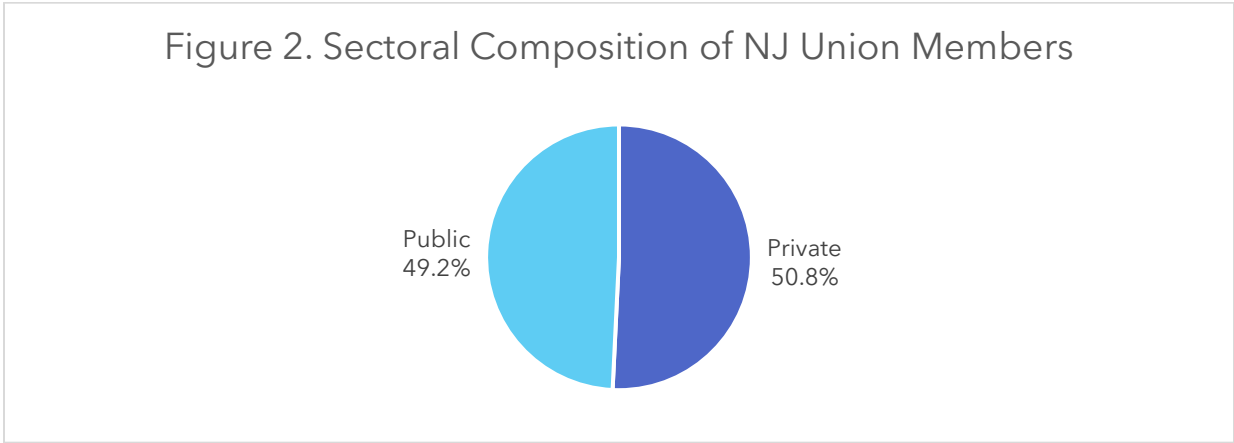
Table 1 presents the unionization rates of New Jersey workers across all sectors as well as by each individual sector. As we can see, the overall “total” union density for the state of New Jersey in the years 2021-2023 is 15.83%, about 6% higher than the U.S. average. Union density within the private sector is also higher in New Jersey than the national average, at 9.3% -- a 1% increase since the previous report. Similar to trends in the U.S. as a whole, unionization rates in New Jersey are considerably higher in the public sector than in the private sector, although this distinction is more pronounced in New Jersey than at the national level. Nationally, union density in the public sector is more than five times the density of private sector workers;<sup>1</sup> in New Jersey public-sector density is more than seven times the rate of private-sector density. Total public-sector density, consisting of federal, state, and local workers is 57.73% in New Jersey, down almost 2% from the last report. Looking more closely at the public sector, we can see that federal employees in New Jersey are unionized at 36.26%, state workers at 58.84%, and local/municipal workers at 62.20%—patterns that have not changed much since the last report.

**Table 1. NJ Union Density by Sector, 2021-2023**

	2019-21	2021-23	Change
<b>Total</b>	16.09	15.83	-0.26
<b>Private Sector</b>	8.30	9.30	+1.00
<b>Public Sector: Total</b>	59.63	57.73	-1.90
<b>Public Sector: Federal</b>	38.89	36.26	-2.63
<b>Public Sector: State</b>	58.99	58.84	-0.15
<b>Public Sector: Local</b>	63.72	62.20	-1.52

Note: estimates denoted with \* should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100

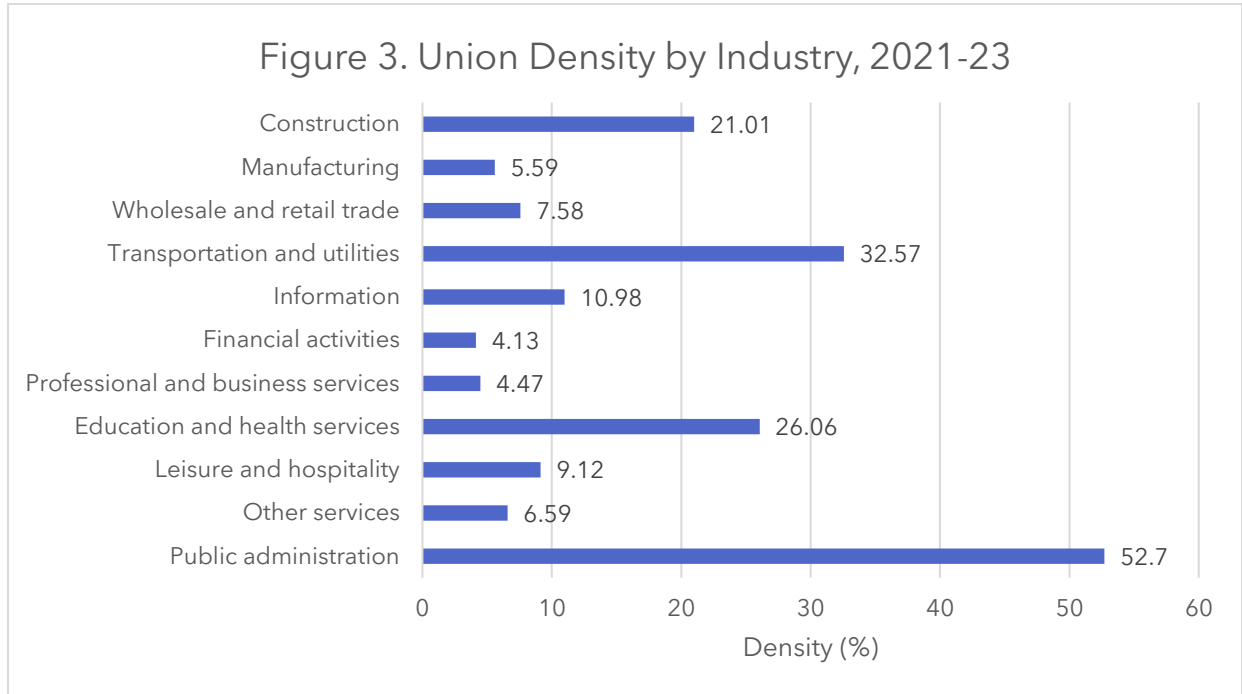
Despite the higher union density in the public sector, the private-sector labor force remains significantly larger, accounting for nearly 85% of all employed workers in the state. Reflective of this, Figure 2 reveals union members are almost evenly divided between private and public sectors.



<sup>1</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024, January 23). Union members summary. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>.

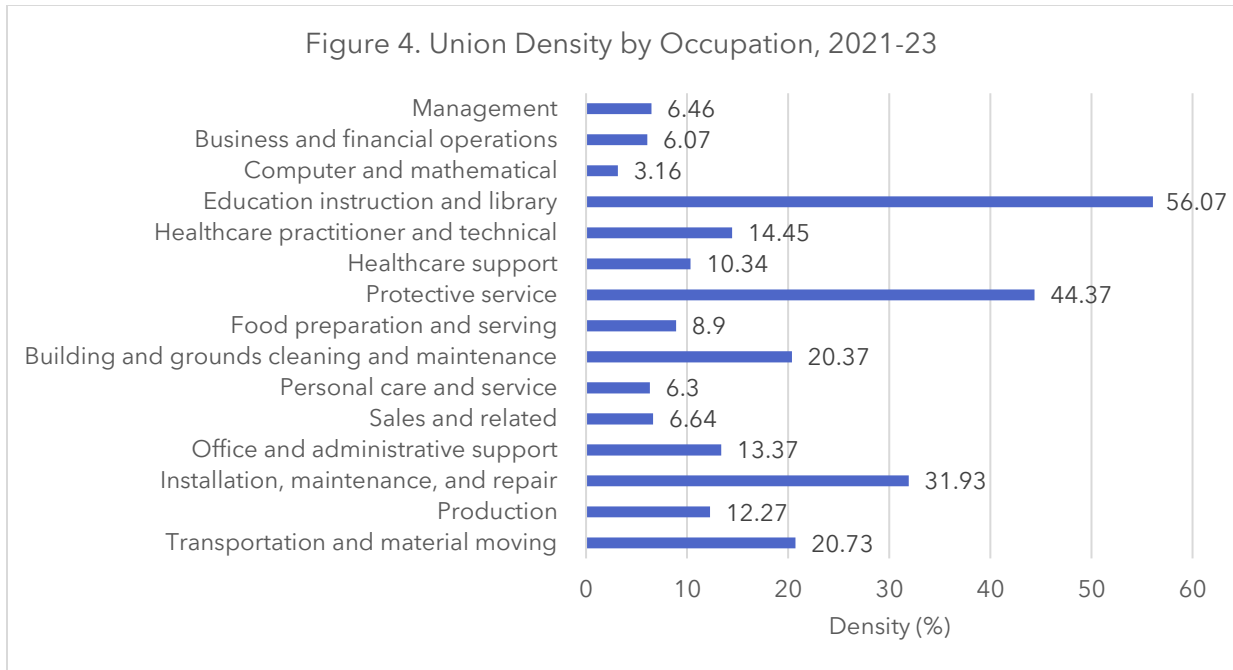
# UNIONIZATION BY INDUSTRY & OCCUPATION

A central question that has plagued the labor movement for decades is how to organize the currently unorganized. Answering this question involves examining a lot of factors, but it ultimately requires understanding what industries and occupations are under-represented by unions, as well as the current footholds labor has that could be leveraged to reach these workers. Looking at all sectors, Figure 3 shows that public administration, transportation and utilities, and education and health services are New Jersey’s most highly unionized industries. Some of the least union-dense industries in NJ include manufacturing, professional and business services, and financial activities.



On a more granular level, we can also see similar trends when looking at union density by occupation. Figure 4 (on the next page) shows that education instruction and library, and protective service occupations both have 56% and 44% union density, respectively, and these occupations are primarily comprised of public sector workers. These two occupations also have the highest union density at the national level.<sup>2</sup> Installation, maintenance, and repair, transportation, and building and grounds cleaning and maintenance occupations also have over 20% of workers organized into unions in New Jersey—occupations located mostly in the private sector. Occupations including computer and mathematical, business and financial, and sales and related currently have some of the lowest levels of union density in the state, tracking closely with national trends. Overall, nine occupations in New Jersey have a density level that is higher than the national average and five are higher than the state average. Six occupations have a density level lower than 10%.

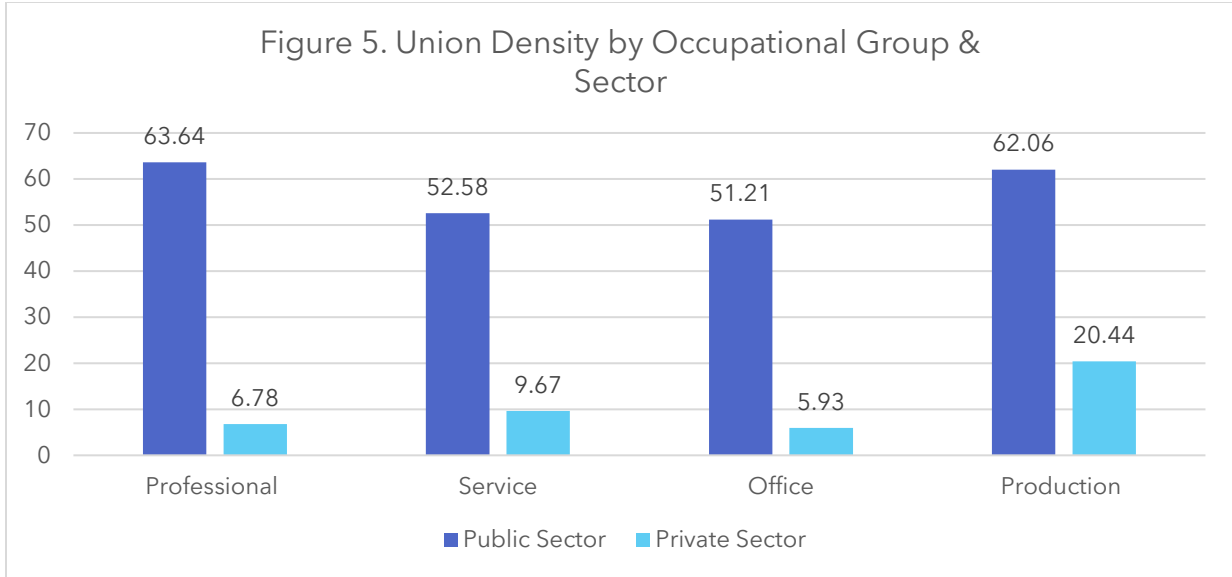
<sup>2</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024, January 23). Union members summary. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>.



Grouping together occupations based on broader characteristics, we can gain better insights on what types of occupations union members are located in, as well as trends in these distributions. Table 2 displays how we combined similar types of occupations into broader groups.

**Table 2. Occupational Groups**

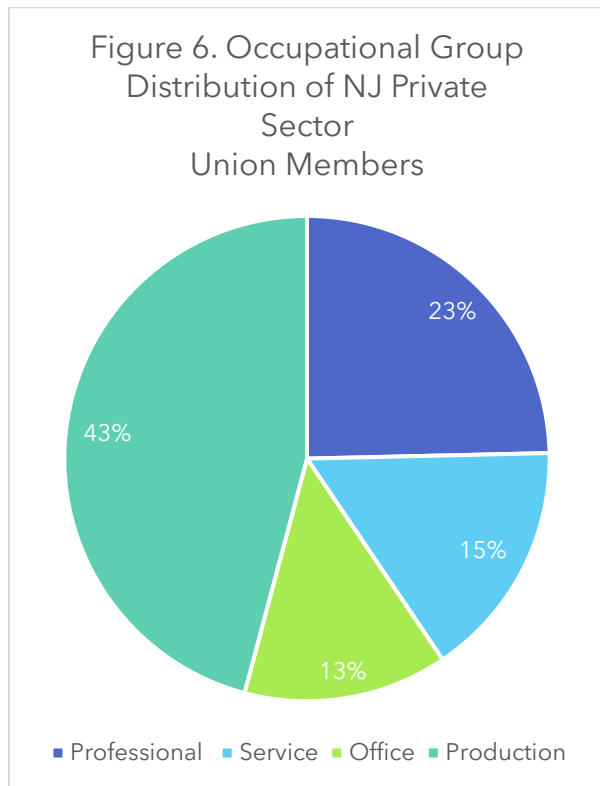
Occupational Group	Constituent Occupations
<b>Production</b>	Construction and extraction Installation, maintenance, and repair Production Transportation and material moving
<b>Service</b>	Healthcare support Protective service Food preparation and serving related Building and grounds cleaning and maintenance Personal care and service
<b>Office</b>	Sales and related Office and administrative support
<b>Professional</b>	Business and financial operations Computer and mathematical Architecture and engineering Life, physical, and social science Community and social service Legal Education instruction and library Arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media Healthcare practitioner and technical
<b>Management</b> (public sector only)	Management

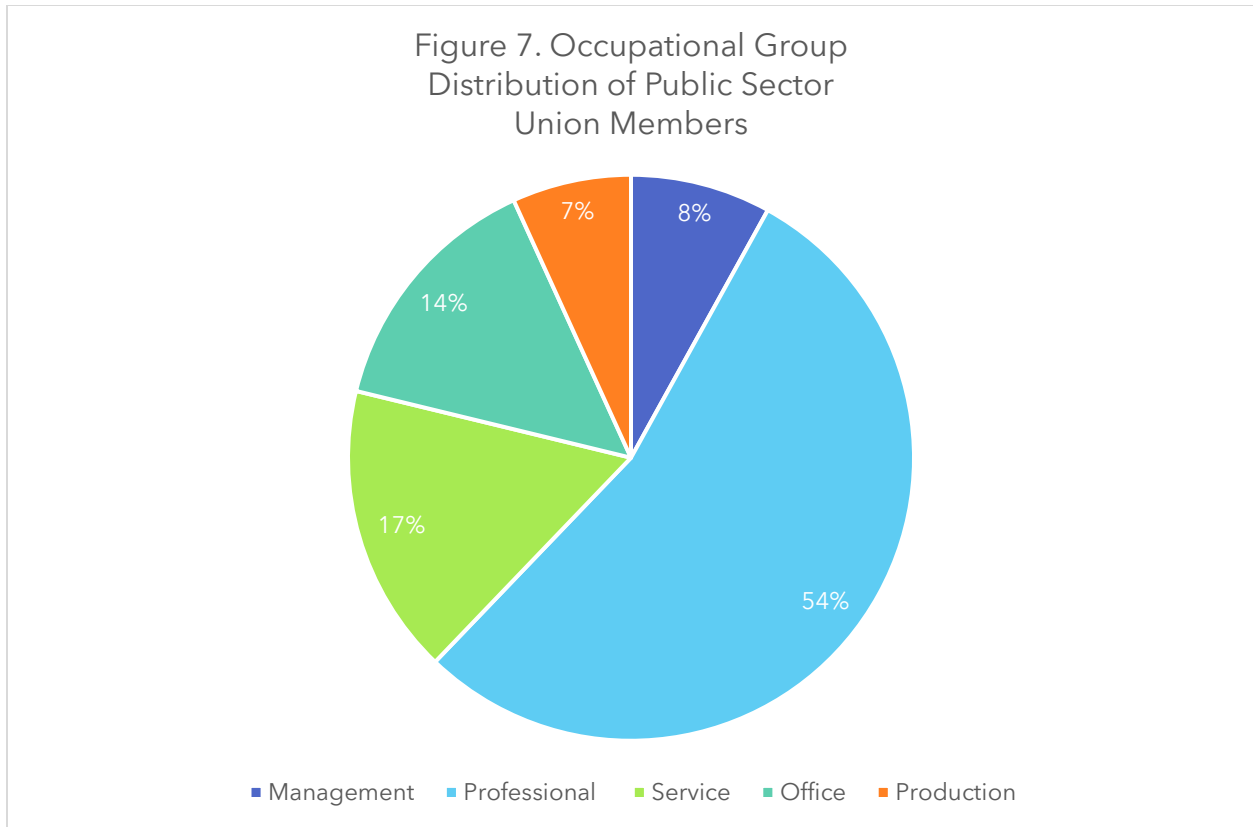


\*Management and production groups estimates in the public sector should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100

Figure 5 displays density among these occupational groups. As we can see, production occupations have the highest density (20.4%) in the private sector, while professional occupations have the highest density in the public sector (63.6%). Management occupations have a lower density in the public sector than other occupations—there are no data for the private sector.

In terms of the distribution of union members within these occupational groups, the “blue/white collar divide” seems to align with the public and private sector division among union members. Figure 6 shows that most private sector union members are found in production (43%) and professional occupations (23%), while Figure 7 on the following page shows that a vast majority of public-sector union members are found in professional (54%) and service (17%) occupations.





While overall support for unions has grown since the pandemic,<sup>3</sup> numerous scholars have noted how the over-representation of professional government workers in the public sector have contributed to new lines of attack against public sector unions. In his book, *What Unions No Longer Do*, sociologist Jake Rosenfeld argues that the near-complete absence of private-sector unions in the U.S. is a large factor in why the labor movement (and any kind of liberal-labor coalition that still exists) is relatively impotent in fighting back against the increasingly virulent attacks against unions from the conservative right. Public-sector workers are generally more educated, more politically engaged, and more likely to vote for Democrats, even before they form or join unions. As labor historian Nelson Lichtenstein argues, “they are a Democratic party constituency, but unionism *per se* had little to do with it.”<sup>4</sup> These factors could play an important role in shaping the future of New Jersey’s labor movement, especially as we continue to live through a period of significant political polarization.

The history of private-sector unionism shows how union membership has had a much more profound impact on the political outlook of these workers, and the gradual decline of unions in the private sector has provided an increasingly large constituency of private-sector workers for the right to exploit and turn against their counterparts in the public sector. In many ways, the Christie administration provided a model for how conservative forces can exploit divisions in the state labor movement for their own anti-union agenda. While Christie was able to secure support from a number of private-sector unions

<sup>3</sup> Brenan, M. (2021, September 17). Approval of labor unions at highest point since 1965. *Gallup*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/354455/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx>.

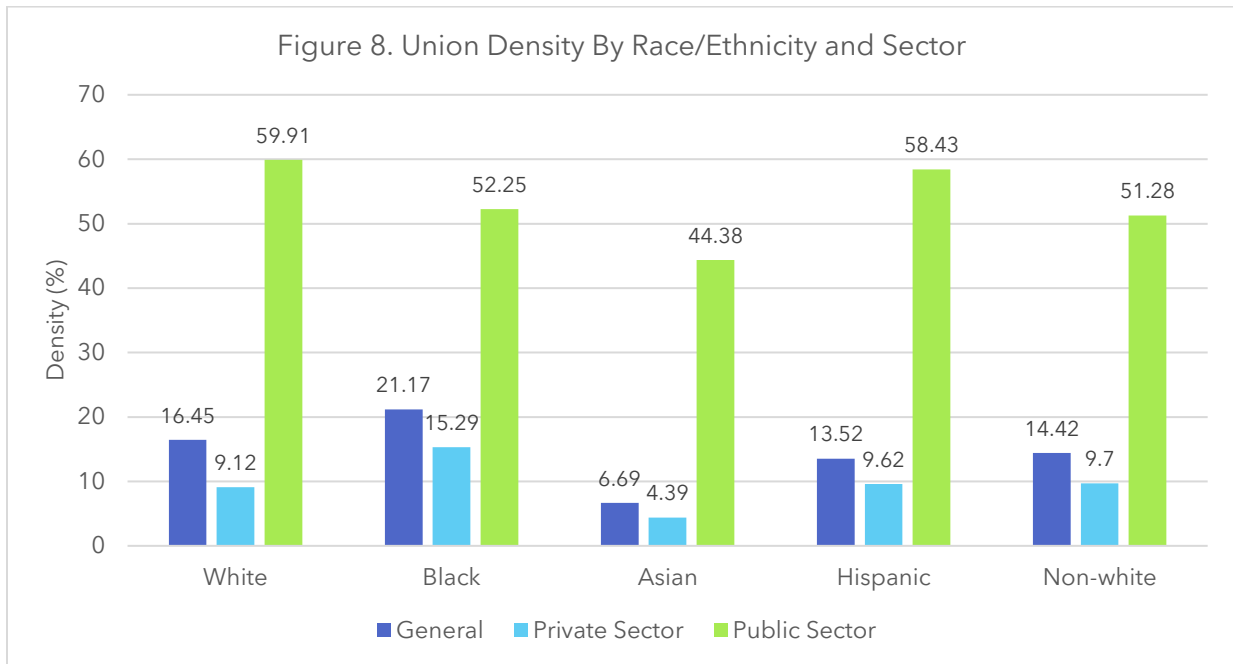
<sup>4</sup> Lichtenstein, N. (2002). *State of the union: A century of American labor*. Princeton University Press.



with the promise of increased job creation, he went on the offensive against public-sector unions, particularly teachers’ unions.<sup>5</sup>

## UNIONIZATION BY DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS

Among major race/ethnicity groups, Figure 8 shows that Black workers in New Jersey continue to have the highest union density compared to other racial and ethnic groups. Moreover, Black union density in the state is almost *double* the 2023 national average of 11.8%.<sup>6</sup> Hispanic workers in the Garden State also outperform their national average of 10%. In the private sector, both Black and Hispanic workers have higher union density than white workers, and non-white workers from other racial and ethnic categories trail closely behind white workers. However, in the public sector, white workers sector have the highest union density among any racial/demographic group.



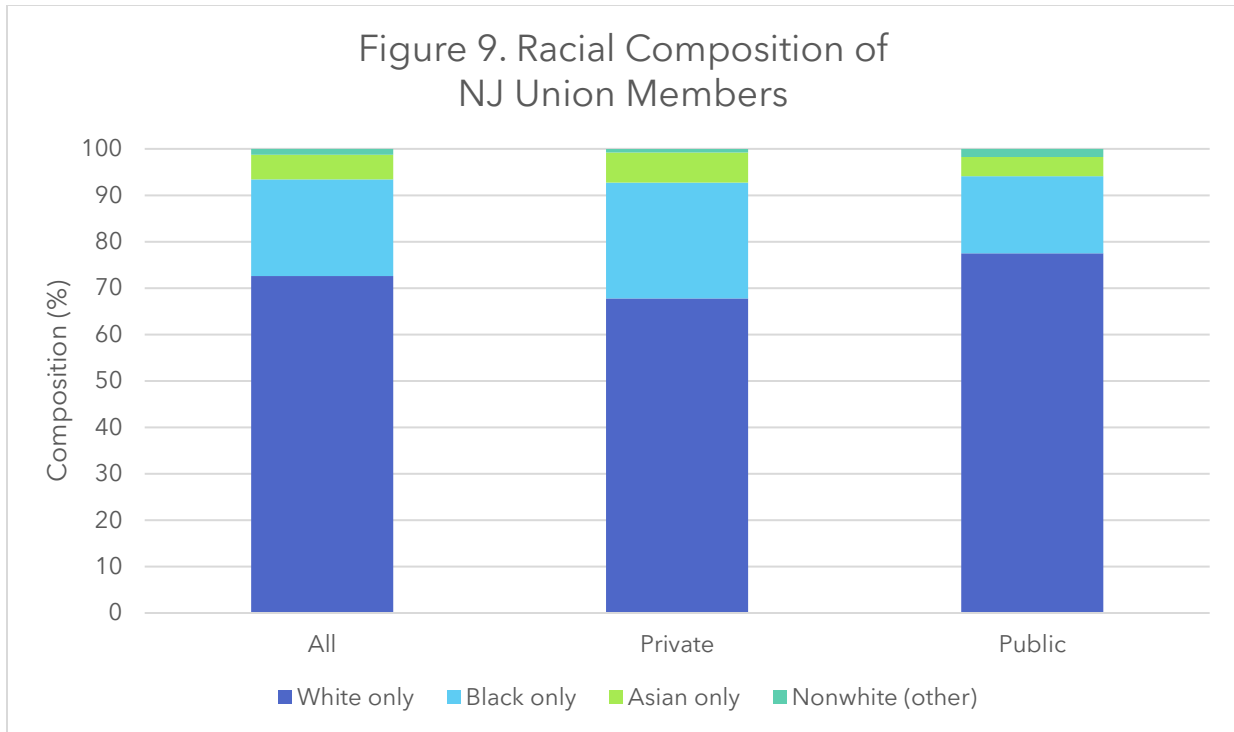
Our analysis shows that white workers (as well as Asian workers) are slightly overrepresented in the state’s public sector, while Black workers are slightly underrepresented compared to the total workforce. Other factors contributing to differences in unionization rates could include the racial concentration of workers in particular occupations, such as educators vs. municipal workers.

<sup>5</sup> Murphy, J. P., Strothers, A. S., & Lugg, C. A. (2017). Jersey-style neoliberalism: Governor Christopher Christie, crony capitalism, and the politics of K-12 Education. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 92(1), 115–126.

<https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2016.1265339>.

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024, January 23). Union members summary.

<https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>.



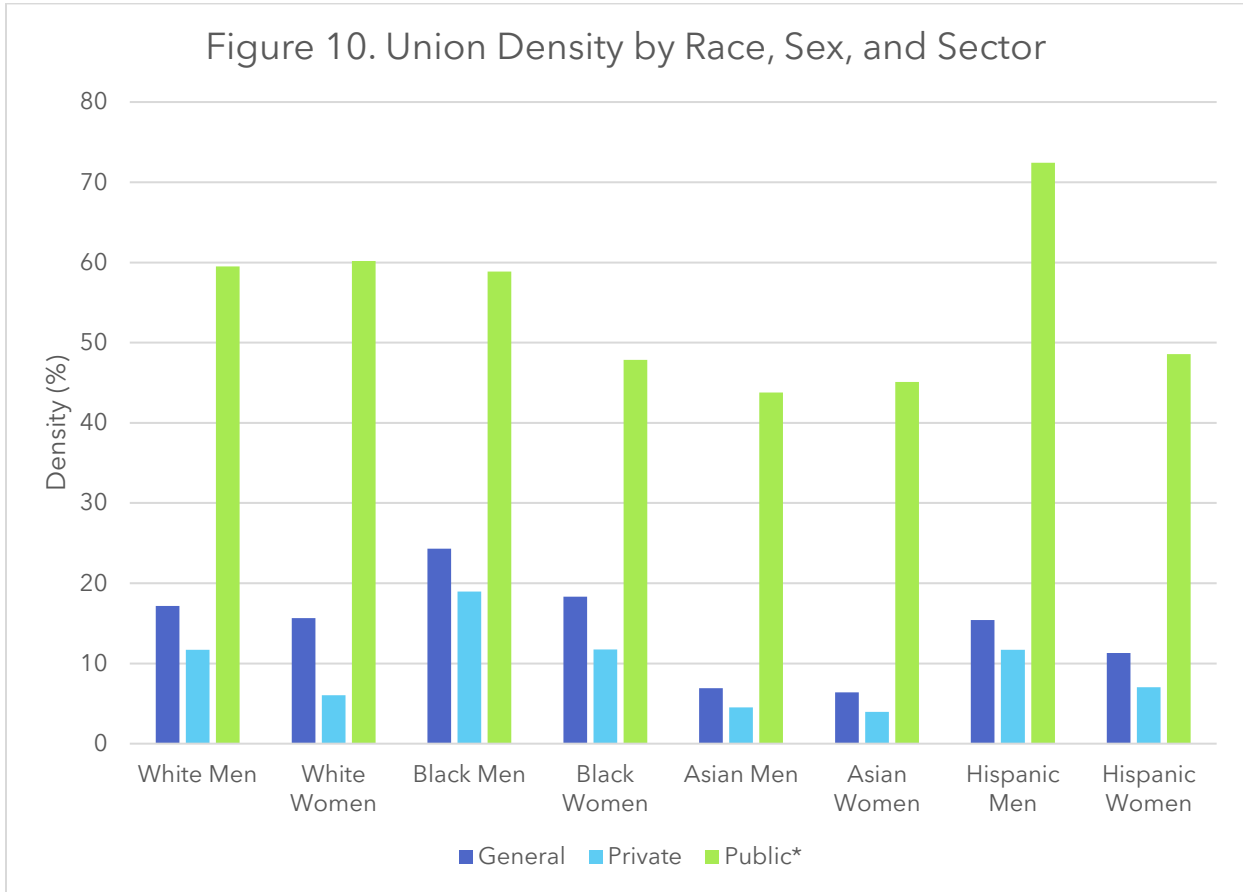
\* Asian public sector estimates should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100.

The racial union density statistics also reflect the trend in the racial composition of union members. As seen in Figure 9, while Black workers comprise a little over 11% of the total workforce, they make up 20% of all union members, nearly 25% of union members in the private sector, and about 16% of public sector union members. Non-white workers are more represented in public sector unions than in private sector unions, while Asian workers are slightly less.

Taking a more intersectional look at union density, Figure 10 (on the next page) shows union density by race/ethnicity, sex, and sector. The dark blue bars represent overall union density while the light blue are for private sector and the green are public sector, respectively. Looking at overall trends, we can see some variation in density across the sectors by demographic characteristics, but overall, the public sector remains more highly unionized than the private sector for all categories of workers.

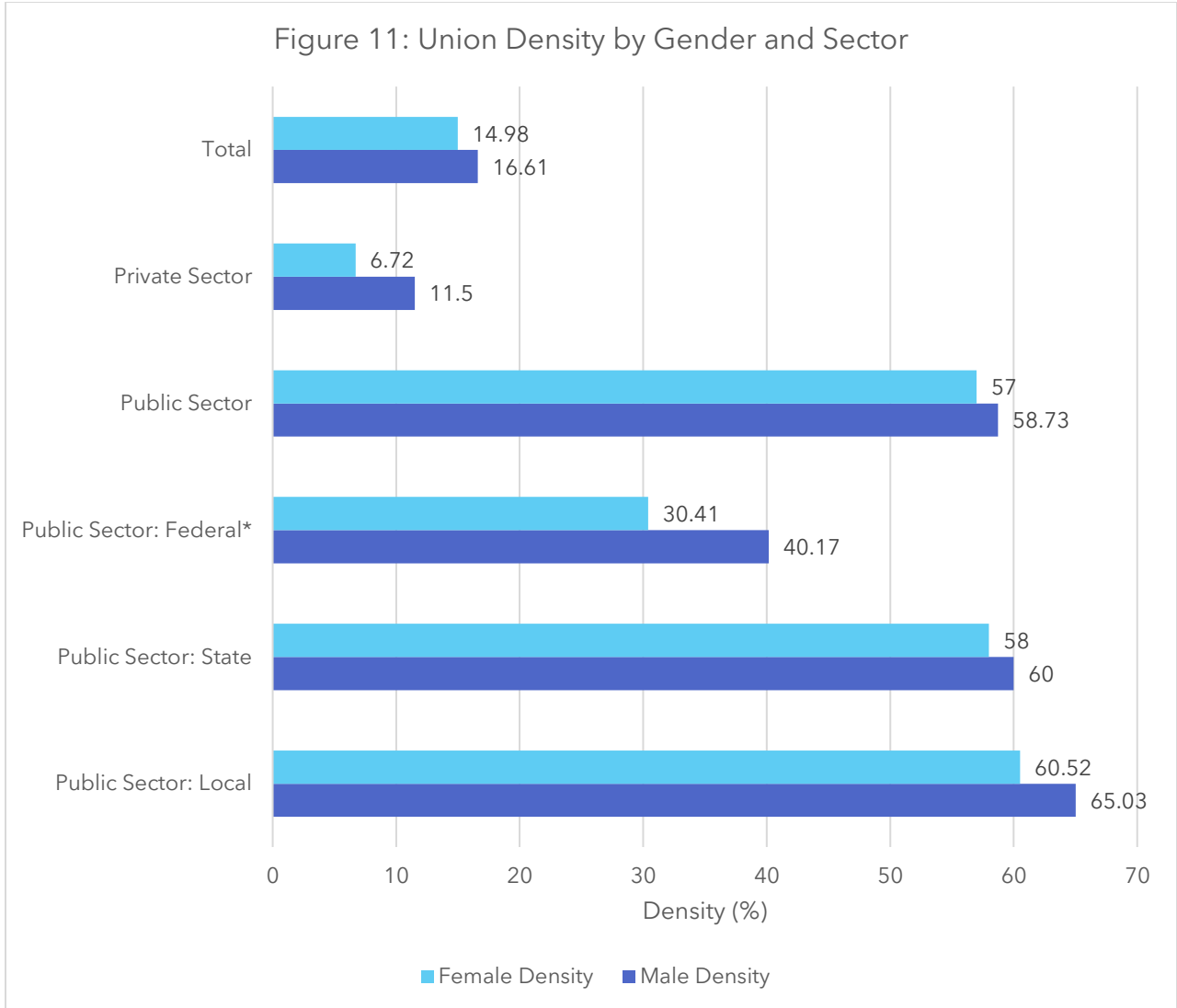
Looking more closely, we can see that Black men have the highest levels of union density in the private sector (15.97%) and among all sectors (21.41%). Black women trail closely behind in their density among all sectors (20.36%), but these women have only 9.5% density in the private sector. Hispanic men are also closely behind Black men in terms of density in the private sector, standing at 14.53% and among all sectors (18.04%). We see the lowest levels of union density among all sectors in Asian women (4.68%), and Asian men have the lowest levels of union density in the private sector (2.93%).

The public sector density statistics discussed above are also reflected in the race and gender breakdowns here, although it is difficult to make concrete conclusions, as most of the public sector tabulations listed here are potentially non-representative given the narrower samples. We can say that white women and white men both lead in union density in the public sector. In addition, while Black women outperform white women in density in the private sector, the reverse is the case in the public sector.



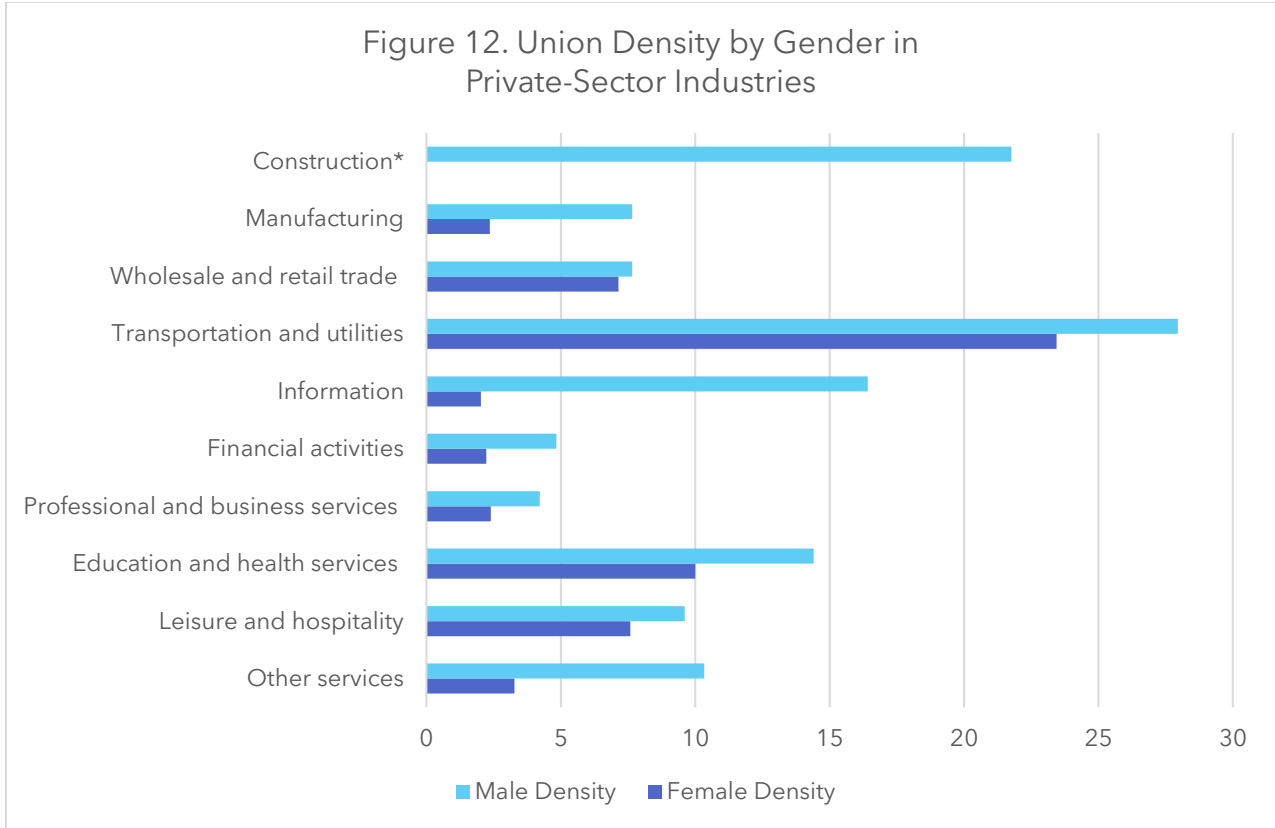
Note: \*Public sector estimates for Black men, Black women, Asian men, Asian women, Hispanic men, and Hispanic women should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100

Union density by gender, displayed below in Figure 11, shows that men and women are roughly even in terms of their overall union density. However, male density in the private sector continues to outpace female density. Men slightly outpace women in terms of union density in the public sector, particularly at the federal level. However, as seen in the next section, these advantages seem to be largely driven by gains made during the pandemic. While female union density has been steady or slightly up during the pandemic, male union density has increased at more rapid rates in both the public and private sectors.

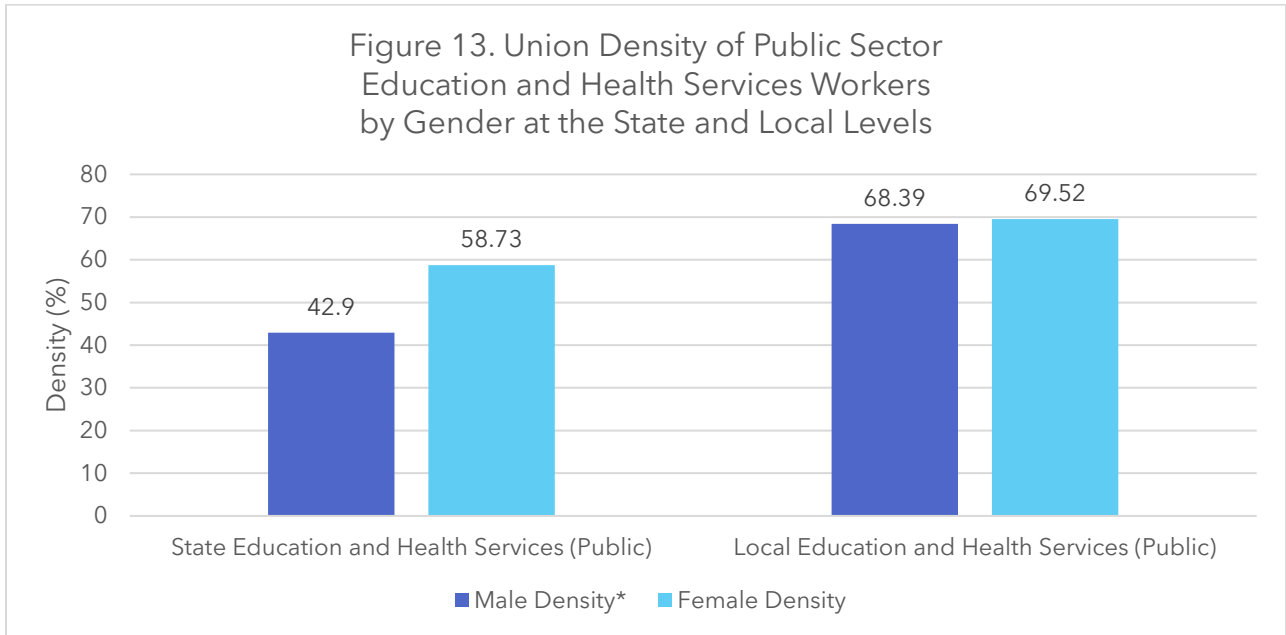


\*Federal public sector estimates should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100.

Reflecting the overall union density picture in private-sector industries, Figure 12 shows that men outpace women in union density across all private-sector industries. Interestingly, we can see a fairly significant density advantage for men in the education and health services industry. However, looking at the density of *public sector* education and health services workers specifically, we see a different picture. Figure 13 shows that public-sector women have a higher union density than men in this industry, at both the state and local level, where women have an impressive 58.73% and 69.52% union density, respectively.



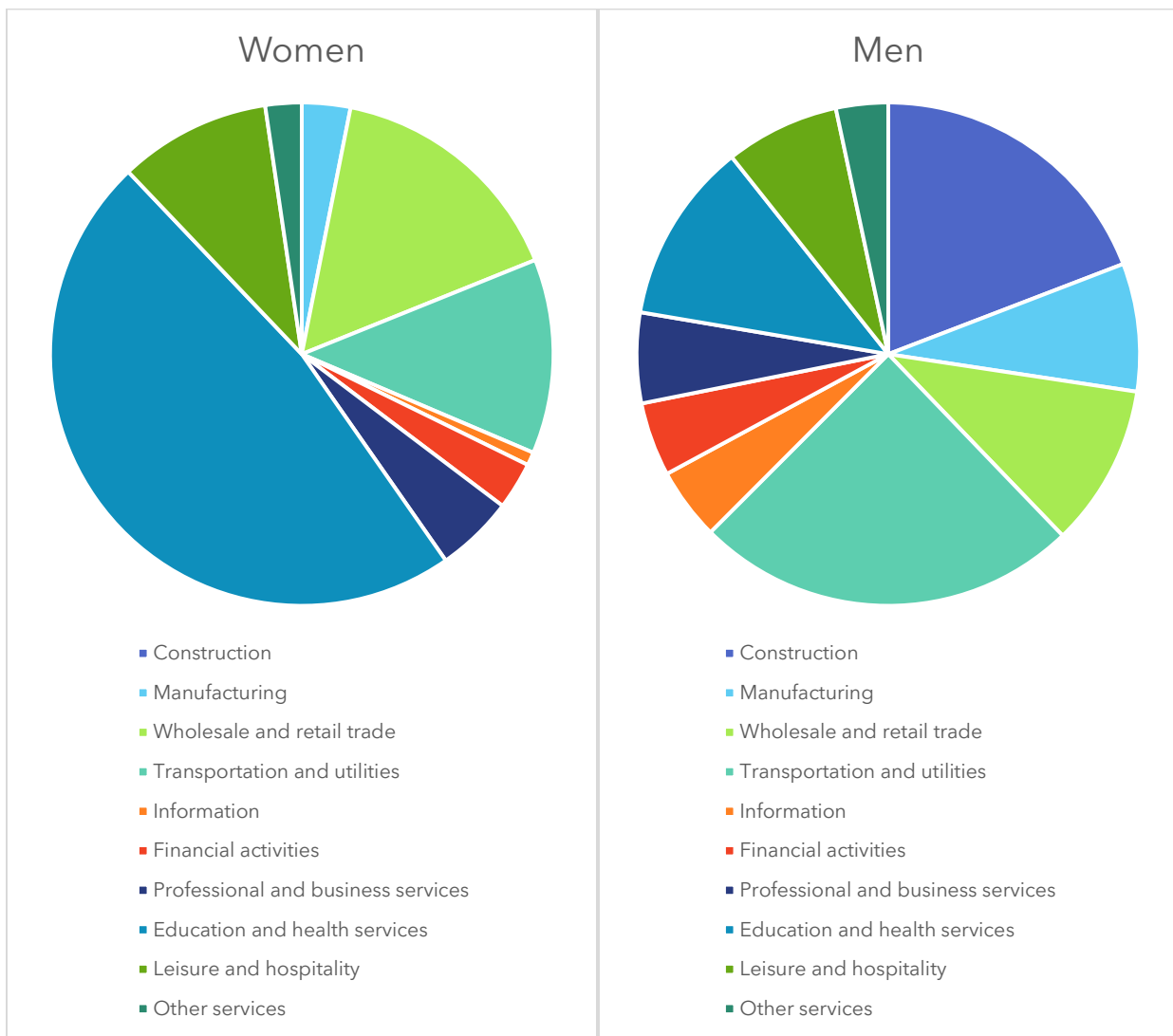
\*Female estimates in construction, and transportation and utilities, and information should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100.



\*Male estimates at the state level should be interpreted with caution as the sample size was <100.

In terms of the distribution of union members in private-sector industries, we can see trends that reflect the long history of gender segregation of employment in particular industries. In Figure 14, we can see that male union members are located primarily in construction and transportation and utilities industries. In contrast, nearly half of unionized women in the private sector are located in education and health services. Wholesale and retail trade also remains a prominent industry for female union members. These distributions may also point to why male union members overtook women both in terms of density and as a share of all union members during the pandemic. From the sectoral data, we know that production-related occupations grew significantly in union density during COVID-19, and this includes the top two industries for male union members. Overall, it seems clear that the occupational landscape in the state remains quite gendered, and that has hurt female union membership during the pandemic.

**Figure 14. Distribution of Union Members by Gender in Private Sector Industries in NJ**



# UNION WAGE PREMIUM

We look next at the difference in pay rates for union vs. non-union workers across a variety of job and personal characteristics. We caution readers that these numbers are just for the sake of comparison as they do not simultaneously take into consideration the full range of factors that may shape differences in wages across various occupations and demographic characteristics. Limited sample sizes prevent us from digging into more granular analyses.

**Table 3. NJ Union Wage Premium Rates, 2021-2023**

Category	Non-Union Weekly	Union Weekly	Union Wage Premium	Pct. Diff
<b>All Workers</b>	\$ 1,162.81	\$ 1,440.69	<b>277.88</b>	<b>21.3%</b>
<b>All Full-time Workers</b>	\$ 1,342.21	\$ 1,500.82	<b>158.61</b>	<b>11.2%</b>
<b>All Part-time Workers</b>	\$ 463.13	\$ 813.62*	<b>350.49</b>	<b>54.9%*</b>
<b>Full-time Only, Detailed</b>				
<b>Private Sector<sup>†</sup></b>	\$ 1,345.05	\$ 1,392.02	<b>46.97</b>	<b>3.4%</b>
<b>Public Sector</b>	\$ 1,302.08	\$ 1,609.62	<b>307.55</b>	<b>21.1%</b>
<b>Public Sector (State)</b>	\$ 1,294.30*	\$ 1,600.59	<b>306.29</b>	<b>21.2%</b>
<b>Public Sector (Local)</b>	\$ 1,247.37	\$ 1,644.70	<b>397.33</b>	<b>27.5%</b>
<b>Men (All)</b>	\$ 1,458.88	\$ 1,575.32	<b>116.44</b>	<b>7.7%</b>
<b>Men up to \$2,465 (2x NJ Average)</b>	\$ 1,225.65	\$ 1,372.58	<b>146.94</b>	<b>11.3%</b>
<b>Men up to \$1.232 (NJ Average)</b>	\$ 843.44	\$ 900.65	<b>57.21</b>	<b>6.6%</b>
<b>Women (All)</b>	\$ 1,202.47	\$ 1,408.70	<b>206.23</b>	<b>15.8%</b>
<b>Women up to \$2,465 (2x NJ Average)</b>	\$ 1,082.45	\$ 1,334.97	<b>252.52</b>	<b>20.9%</b>
<b>Women up to \$1.232 (NJ Average)</b>	\$ 814.54	\$ 899.87	<b>85.34</b>	<b>10.0%</b>
<b>White</b>	\$ 1,326.34	\$ 1,561.76	<b>235.42</b>	<b>16.3%</b>
<b>Black</b>	\$ 1,108.34	\$ 1,230.59	<b>122.25</b>	<b>10.5%</b>
<b>Hispanic</b>	\$ 972.18	\$ 1,195.00	<b>222.82</b>	<b>20.6%</b>
<b>Young (16-24yrs in age)</b>	\$ 854.98	\$ 1,037.97*	<b>182.99</b>	<b>19.3%*</b>
<b>Prime (25-65yrs in age)</b>	\$ 1,390.30	\$ 1,517.29	<b>127.00</b>	<b>8.7%</b>
<b>Construction</b>	\$ 1,163.70	\$ 1,616.91*	<b>453.20</b>	<b>32.6%*</b>
<b>Service Sector</b>	\$ 1,183.96	\$ 1,440.27	<b>256.31</b>	<b>19.5%</b>
<b>Education and Health</b>	\$ 1,331.02	\$ 1,564.05	<b>233.03</b>	<b>16.1%</b>
<b>Protective Service</b>	\$ 1,009.28*	\$ 1,815.44*	<b>806.16</b>	<b>57.1%*</b>

<sup>†</sup>Private sector weekly wages are derived only from occupations with sufficient sample size to avoid any potential skewing because of outliers - non-eligible managerial occupations excluded.

\* Estimates should be interpreted with caution due to low sample size (N < 100).

Looking at Table 3, we can see that on average full-time unionized workers in New Jersey made over 11% more than their non-unionized counterparts between 2021 and 2023. Part-time workers appear to benefit even more from having a union, earning more than 54% higher wages each week, driving the total union wage premium for all workers (part-time and full-time) up to over 21%. It is unclear if

the significant premium for part-time workers is due to higher pay rates for unionized shops or if issues related to scheduling and minimum hours are driving the difference.

Unionized workers in local governments seem to be receiving the highest wage premium amongst the sectors. Again, we caution readers as this could be a result of which municipal occupations are more likely to be unionized. Along gender lines, women benefit significantly from having a union, earning 15.8% more than their non-union counterparts. Looking at race and ethnicity, Hispanic workers benefit the most from having a union in their workplace, earning over 20% more than their non-union counterparts. Young workers also seem to be strongly benefitting from unionization in terms of wages, but these estimates should be read with caution as the sample size was below the threshold of 100. Looking more closely at a few industries and occupations, private sector construction workers make over 30% more with a union while service sector workers make nearly 20% more with a union. Education and health and protective service workers make over 16% more when they are unionized.

Taken together, we can see that despite declining union density in recent decades, union workers still earn more on average than their non-union counterparts. When workers have the ability to bargain collectively over wages, they tend to bring home a greater percentage of the value they produce with their labor.

## WORK STOPPAGES

From 2021’s Striketober, to the Hot Labor Summer of 2023, the past several years have witnessed a sharp uptick in work stoppages. In 2022 there were 434 strikes across the United States, up 52% over the previous year, involving 224,000 workers, up 60%, with the largest number occurring in accommodation and food services, educational services, and transportation and warehousing.<sup>iv</sup> About 31.1% of strikes were by nonunionized workers, but such strikes comprised only 3.1% of striking workers, signaling the grass-roots level of most union recognition strikes.

In New Jersey, there have been 26 total strikes since 2021, with at least 10 that involved 100 workers or more. Table 4 lists the largest strikes in terms of workers involved since 2021. The biggest recent strikes in the state have occurred in the last two years. The stoppage at Rutgers University in 2023 was the largest recent strike, involving 9,000 faculty, staff, and graduate workers, followed by the 2023 nurses strike at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital.

**Table 4. Largest NJ Work Stoppages, 2021-2024**

Employer	Year	Industry	No. Workers
Rutgers University	2023	Educational Services	9,000
Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital	2023	Health Care and Social Assistance	1,700
New Jersey Transit	2022	Transportation and Warehousing	500
Atlantic City Electric	2023	Utilities	400
St. Michael's Medical Center - Prime Healthcare	2022	Health Care and Social Assistance	350



Table 5 presents data on the longest strikes in New Jersey since 2021. By far, the strike at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital mentioned above was the longest recent strike in the state, lasting more than one-third of a year (134 days). The other next-longest strikes lasted just over one month, between 31 and 35 days.

**Table 5. Longest NJ Work Stoppages, 2021-2024**

Employer	Year	Industry	No. Days
Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital	2023	Health Care and Social Assistance	134
City of Camden	2023	Administrative and Support and Waste Management, Public Administration	35
Atlantic City Electric	2023	Utilities	31
St. Michael's Medical Center - Prime Healthcare	2022	Health Care and Social Assistance	31
Journal of Biogeography - John Wiley and Sons	2023	Information	31

As Tables 4 and 5 show, the New Jersey health care industry featured some of the longest and the largest strikes in recent history. The industry as a whole witnessed the second greatest number of strikes since 2021 (4), preceded only by transportation and warehousing (6), and following accommodation and food services (3). Importantly, half of the transportation and warehousing work stoppages (3) occurred at Amazon facilities in New Jersey, and all the strikes in accommodation and food services were among Starbucks baristas affiliated with Starbucks Workers United.

## CONCLUSION

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic we have been experiencing a resurgence of union activity and interest in unions by US workers. Beginning with health and safety concerns during the early days of the pandemic, followed by rising inflation during the recovery, local unions have been taking a more aggressive approach in contract negotiations, demanding larger wage increases, better scheduling practices, stronger safety measures, the end of two-tier benefits and pay schemes, and more. In many instances, as was the case with John Deere and Kellogg’s in the Fall of 2021, rank-and-file members have voted down tentative agreements, sending bargaining teams back to the table to demand more and winning 10% pay increases and \$8,500 ratification bonuses at John Deere and cost of living adjustments at Kellogg’s.

Workers involved in strikes in 2022 have cited the cycle of concessions during economic downturns followed by periods of relative prosperity in which nearly all the economic gains go to the top 10% — drawing a clear line between past concessions and the increased concentration of income at the top. Indeed, wages for nonsupervisory workers have been stagnant since the 1970s despite continual increases in worker productivity and soaring salaries of top executives. Thanks in part to a tight

labor market and the support of President Biden and the National Labor Relations Board, unionized workers have been pushing demands to reverse this trend. Absent a reserve pool of unemployed workers desperate to fill jobs, the threat of a strike is more powerful than it has been in recent memory. In fact, three times as many workers went on strike in 2022 than over the same period in 2021.<sup>7</sup>

But contract campaigns and strikes are only part of the story. The labor resurgence is also happening among non-unionized workers in industries and occupations that have historically lacked measurable union representation. Amazon warehouse workers, Starbucks baristas, Chipotle workers, Apple workers, Trader Joe's workers, and workers in over 600 other workplaces voted to form unions during the first six months of 2022—up 80% percent from the same period the previous year (Bloomberg Law 2022). This is no small feat given the lack of real punishment for anti-union employers that engage in hostile, and often illegal, anti-union activities, including firing workers for engaging in protected organizing activity.

In addition to new organizing drives and bold actions by existing unions, we have also witnessed an increase in demands by workers on issues that go beyond just wages. For example, one of the major sticking points in the 2022 negotiations between unions and railroad companies was work-life balance.<sup>8</sup> Teamsters at UPS are determined to have A/C installed in all trucks and to replace temporary and part-time jobs with full-time employment. Starbucks' baristas cite scheduling and staffing as major motivators for organizing. Teachers across the US, including in several Red States, have struck for increased educational funding and resources for students. Janitors with SEIU in Minneapolis even struck over concerns about climate change.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these important rays of light and glimmers of hope, union density continues to decline. Although labor added an historic 273,000 members last year, only 10.1% of US workers were unionized, down from 10.3% in 2021. These conflicting trends stem from the fact that the growth of the labor force overall last year outpaced the historic gains in union membership, leading to yet another year of declining union density. However, unlike nationally, in New Jersey new organizing in the private sector has increased the ranks of private-sector unions by 1%, but a nearly 2% decline in public-sector density has left total union density at nearly its pre-pandemic level. These patterns of labor union density are also reflective of the persistent challenges faced by workers seeking to organize in New Jersey and beyond. Nevertheless, enthusiasm for organized labor shows no signs of abating, which may continue to benefit organized labor in the near term.

---

<sup>7</sup> ILR LER. (2024) *Labor Action Tracker*. <https://striketracker.ilr.cornell.edu/>

<sup>8</sup> Sainato, M. (2022, September 14). US railroad workers prepare for strikes as rail companies see record profits. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/sep/14/us-railroad-strike-union-pacific-bnsf>

<sup>9</sup> Altamirano, I., Nammacher, G., & Dalal-Whelan, P. (2020, April 30). Lessons from the First Union Climate Strike in the U.S. *Labor Notes*. <https://labornotes.org/2020/04/lessons-first-union-climate-strike-us>

## NOTES

- i. “Union density” denotes the proportion of all full-time, nonagricultural, wage and salary workers who are union members in a region, occupation, or industry. Data for the state rankings displayed in Figure 1 are from Hirsch and Macpherson, 2022.
- ii. The “2021-23” data discussed here and shown in the figures and tables throughout are the averages for the 36 months merged into one data set. All results are calculated for employed civilian wage and salary workers aged 16 and over. We followed the sample definition and weighting procedures described in Barry T. Hirsch and David A. Macpherson, *Union Membership and Earnings Data Book* (Washington D.C.: Bureau of National Affairs, 2018).
- iii. To ensure reliability, given the limitations of the CPS dataset, we have attempted to restrict unionization rates only for subgroups that have a minimum of 100 observations. Subgroups such as individual occupations and racial categories that fall below this threshold are combined into larger groups (e.g., “nonwhite” as opposed to black, Asian, etc.) to provide projections. In some cases, for subgroups that fall slightly below our reliability threshold, we have still reported these tabulations but indicated that they should be interpreted with caution as they may be derived from non-representative samples.
- iv. The work stoppage data discussed here and shown in tables in this section come from the Cornell University of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign School of Labor & Employment Relations (LER) Labor Action Tracker. While the US Department of Labor provides data on work stoppages, the Department only records strikes that involve more than 1,000 workers. The Labor Action Tracker records all strikes and provides, therefore, more comprehensive information on US work stoppages. Of the 26 strikes in New Jersey since 2021, 6 (23%) occurred in work sites both in New Jersey and work sites in at least one other state.

## REFERENCES

- Altamirano, I., Nammacher, G., & Dalal-Whelan, P. (2020, April 30). Lessons from the First Union Climate Strike in the U.S. *Labor Notes*. <https://labornotes.org/2020/04/lessons-first-union-climate-strike-us>.
- Brenan, M. (2021, September 17). Approval of labor unions at highest point since 1965. *Gallup*. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/354455/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx>.
- Cornell University School of Industrial and Labor Relations (ILR) and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign School of Labor & Employment Relations (LER). 2024. *Labor Action Tracker*. <https://striketracker.ilr.cornell.edu/>.
- Hirsch, B.T. & Macpherson, D.A. (2022). Union Membership and Coverage Database from the CPS. <http://unionstats.com/>.
- Lichtenstein, N. (2002). *State of the union: A century of American labor*. Princeton University Press
- Murphy, J. P., Strothers, A. S., & Lugg, C. A. (2017). Jersey-style neoliberalism: Governor Christopher Christie, crony capitalism, and the politics of K-12 Education. *Peabody Journal of Education*, 92(1), 115–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2016.1265339>.
- Sainato, M. (2022, September 14). US railroad workers prepare for strikes as rail companies see record profits. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2022/sep/14/us-railroad-strike-union-pacific-bnsf>.
- Rosenfeld, J. (2014). *What unions no longer do*. Harvard University Press.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024, January 23). Union members summary. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/union2.nr0.htm>.