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## Study finds W.Va. union workers earn higher wages

While the majority of service workers in West Virginia have seen their wages decline or stagnate over the last couple of decades, a new study shows that belonging to a union could boost pay for the state's service-sector employees.



Between 2004 and 2007, the median wage paid unionized service workers in West Virginia was \$18.44 an hour, compared to \$12.47 an hour paid to non-union service workers, according to "Unions and Upward Mobility for Service-Sector Workers," a study released jointly by the D.C.-based Center for Economic and Policy Research and the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy.

Thirty years ago, West Virginia had one of the nation's highest percentages of union workers. While the state still has one of the highest unionization rates in the South, a region notorious for its anti-union policies, the state has seen a drastic decline in union numbers. In recent years, about 77 percent of West Virginians held service-sector jobs, but only 13.1 percent of them were unionized.

On top of higher wages, unionization also increases the likelihood that service workers, especially those in low-wage occupations, will have health insurance and retirement benefits in West Virginia. Service workers in low-paying jobs who were union members were 26 percent more likely to have employer-sponsored health insurance and 23 percent more likely to have employer-funded pension plans, according to the study.

The impact of unions on service-sector employees in low-wage occupations was even more significant. For workers in the 15 lowest-paying occupations, unionization raised wages by 15.5 percent. The likelihood of having health insurance increased by about 26 percentage points and the likelihood of having an employer sponsored pension increased by about 23 percentage points.

Over the past 30 years, the U.S. economy has shifted significantly from manufacturing to service-sector jobs, contributing to a decline in national unionization rates. This decline in unionization has led to slipping workforce power and fewer benefits for employees. Last year

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union membership rose to 12.4 percent, an increase from 2007's 12.1 percent, yet still a far drop from the 20.1 percent of 1983.

As manufacturing employment has declined, the service sector has grown to account for more than three-fourths of all jobs in the United States. The findings in the report suggest that better protection of workers' right to unionize would have a substantial positive impact on the pay and benefits of service-sector workers, according to the study.



By [Desiree Evans](#) on [May 18, 2009 2:21 PM](#)

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