

Union elections up 35 percent

The number of petitions for elections to organize unions has shot up in the 2024 fiscal year—about a third more than in the same period a year ago. The surge in elections is part of a trend of rising public popularity regarding unions in recent years.

The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) said it had received 1,618 union election petitions—filed by workers to decide whether a union will represent them at their company—in the first half of the current fiscal year, Oct. 1, 2023, to March 31, 2024. That is an increase of 35 percent over the same period in the 2023 fiscal year.

Unions are winning more certification of those elections, too. Workers voted in favor of a union in 74 percent of union elections through April of this year—the highest win rate in 15 years, according to a study by the Center for American Progress.

The trend doesn't appear to be slowing, and unions are breaking new ground. In April, employees at a Volkswagen plant in Chattanooga, TN, voted to join the United Auto Workers (UAW)—the first big win for the union at a foreign carmaker in the South, a region where unions long have struggled. Following two previous losses, the UAW won the election in Chattanooga with 73 percent of the vote, winning representation for 3,600 workers. See the June issue of *The Postal Record* for more information.

It's important, however, to put these developments in perspective: Unions haven't yet turned around labor's longtime membership decline. The 11 percent of U.S. workers represented by unions is the lowest in many decades, and is less than one-third of the 35 percent unionized



Photo by Diana Hussein

Volkswagen workers in Chattanooga, TN, celebrate in April after a successful vote to unionize with the United Auto Workers.

workforce of the mid-1950s, labor's high point.

That said, the current positive trends can only be seen as promising moving forward. It's difficult to point to a cause for the trends, but a focus on working conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the demands on workers that followed when the emergency eased, might have fueled renewed support for unions.

The sharp turn from the Trump administration's anti-union policies to a more welcoming Biden administration—led by a president who has called himself “the most pro-union president in American history”—probably has contributed to the greater success of unions as well. Under Biden's leadership, the NLRB has made it easier and quicker for workers to organize unions.

A 2023 NLRB ruling, for instance, held that when a majority of workers give evidence—usually signed authorization cards—that they support a union, it automatically certifies that

union unless the employer petitions for an election. This policy prevents an employer from blocking a union certification election. The board also ruled that in the event of an unfair labor practice committed by the employer, instead of running the election again, the board will order the employer to recognize and bargain with the union.

The NLRB under Biden also backed the right of private college and university student workers to unionize, expanding the pool of potential union workers who are more likely to vote “yes.”

Unions are popular these days in opinion polls. A survey commissioned by the AFL-CIO last year found that two-thirds of Americans support unions—and among people younger than 30, the favorability rating is a whopping 88 percent. A majority of Republicans (52 percent) said they support unions, along with much higher rates among independents and Democrats. **PR**