



Nebraska's Labor Movement

**Exploring Union Membership,
Perceptions, and Efficacy**



UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
CENTER FOR PUBLIC AFFAIRS RESEARCH



UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA
WILLIAM BRENNAN INSTITUTE FOR LABOR STUDIES

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

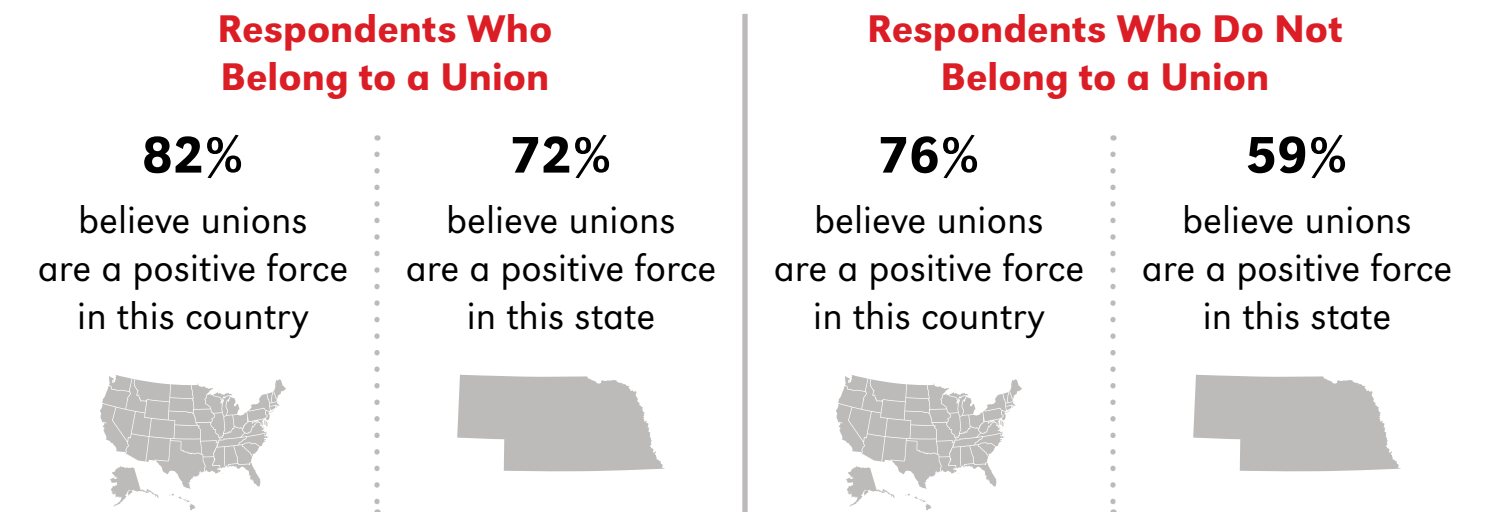
In 2022, U.S. approval of labor unions was at its highest point since 1965;¹ however, apathy among labor union members persists and has significant implications for the labor movement more broadly. Although the share of U.S. workers who belong to a union has fallen over time, the majority of Americans view this as a bad thing for working people (59%) and the country overall (54%).² In an effort to better understand the labor movement in Nebraska, the William Brennan Institute for Labor Studies (WBILS) partnered with the Center for Public Affairs Research (CPAR), both housed in the College of Public Affairs and Community Service at the University of Nebraska at Omaha, to study union membership and participation in Nebraska and better understand members' attitudes toward unions and union efficacy.

UNO CPAR developed an online survey using Qualtrics Survey Software. The survey was distributed to key labor organizations in Nebraska and was also open to members of the public via distribution on social media. The survey was open from September 2023 through February 2024. In total, the survey received 600 responses.

74% of respondents are currently members of a union

26% are not currently in a union

Among survey respondents, 43% have belonged to a union for less than five years, 19% between five to ten years, 13% between ten to twenty years, and 25% over 20 years. The survey demonstrates that, overall, respondents have a high regard for unions and believe workers are better off when affiliated with a union. This is true among both respondents who are currently members of a union and those who do not belong to a union.



¹ McCarthy, J. (2022, August 30). U.S. approval of labor unions at highest point since 1965. <https://news.gallup.com/poll/398303/approval-labor-unions-highest-point-1965.aspx>

² Van Green, T. (2024, March 12). Majorities of adults see decline of union membership as bad for the U.S. and working people. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2024/03/12/majorities-of-adults-see-decline-of-union-membership-as-bad-for-the-us-and-working-people/>

Respondents were asked about the large reduction in the percentage of workers represented by unions over the past several decades and whether this is good or bad for working people. Among respondents who belong to a union, nearly 60% believe this reduction in representation is very bad for working people. Interestingly, among respondents who do not currently belong to a union, 58% view this reduction in representation as very bad for working people as well. Findings indicate that, regardless of involvement in a union, respondents share a positive view of unions and recognize the benefits of being in a union for working people.

89% of respondents who currently belong to a union are glad labor unions exist



Survey findings also indicate that union members value the sense of belonging and community that comes with being in a union. Among respondents, 60% feel a strong sense of belonging to their union and 55% have strong bonds to their union that would be hard to cut off. The data suggest that union members value community and collective commitment to a cause as experienced through union membership. Unsurprisingly then, 81% of respondents believe that workers need strong trade unions to protect their interests and 77% believe in the goals of organized labor.

In terms of union efficacy, survey findings demonstrate that unions are overall highly effective in advocating for, protecting, and improving workers' rights. Over 60% of respondents agree that their union is effective at improving their pay, improving their physical work environment, and protecting their employment security. According to respondents, the top benefits of belonging to a union include access to pensions and retirement security and access to affordable healthcare and medical benefits.

77% of respondents who currently belong to a union believe in the goals of organized labor

Survey findings suggest that there is support for unions and the labor movement more broadly in Nebraska. This support is evident in how union members perceive the purpose and effectiveness of unions. However, this support does not necessarily translate into members' willingness to assume leadership roles within their local union chapters. When asked about their involvement in union leadership, 23% of respondents currently hold a leadership position in their local chapter, 10% have held a position in the past, and 67% have never held a leadership position. Although identifying the next generation of union leadership may present challenges, the labor movement overall retains strong support in Nebraska.

According to survey respondents, union membership offers many benefits.

- ✓ Job security and stability
- ✓ Competitive and fair pay
- ✓ Affordable healthcare and medical benefits
- ✓ Access to pensions and retirement benefits
- ✓ Sense of belonging and collective voice
- ✓ Education and training opportunities
- ✓ Equal opportunities and representation
- ✓ Improved safety and working conditions

RESEARCH DESIGN

UNO CPAR developed a survey instrument using Qualtrics Survey Software. Survey questions asked about general attitudes toward unions as well as union efficacy. Survey questions were adapted based on validated survey instruments from McShane (1986), Sverke & Kuruvillea (1995), Educators for Excellence (2018), and the American Federation of Teachers (2022).

The survey was open from September 23, 2023 through February 26, 2024. In that time, the survey garnered 600 responses.

The survey was open to union members and nonunion members to better understand how union members and members of the public at large feel toward labor unions in Nebraska. The survey was shared on social media on the William Brennan Institute for Labor Studies Facebook, X, and LinkedIn platforms.

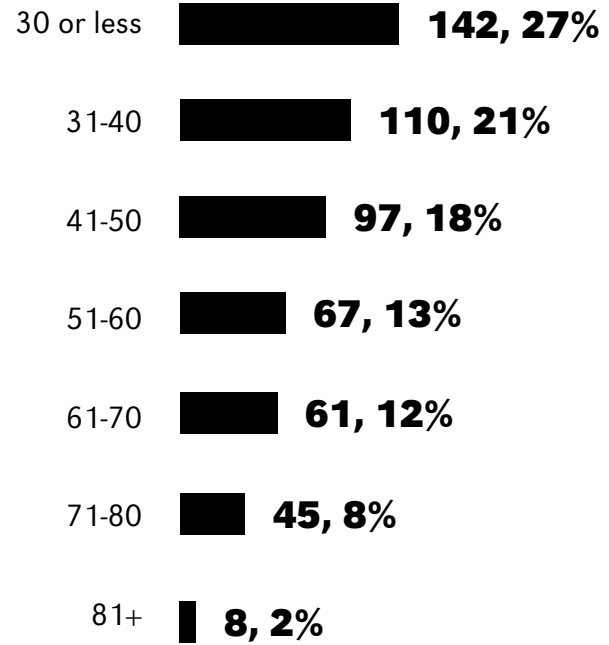
Additionally, the survey link was emailed to the following organizations with a direct appeal to forward the survey to their member lists:

- Nebraska State AFL-CIO member unions
- Omaha Federation of Labor member unions
- Midwest Nebraska Central Labor Council member unions
- Lincoln Central Labor Union member unions
- Nebraska State Education Association member unions
- Nebraska State Democratic Party
- Nebraska State Republican Party
- Douglas County Democratic Party
- Douglas County Republican Party
- Nebraska Young Republicans

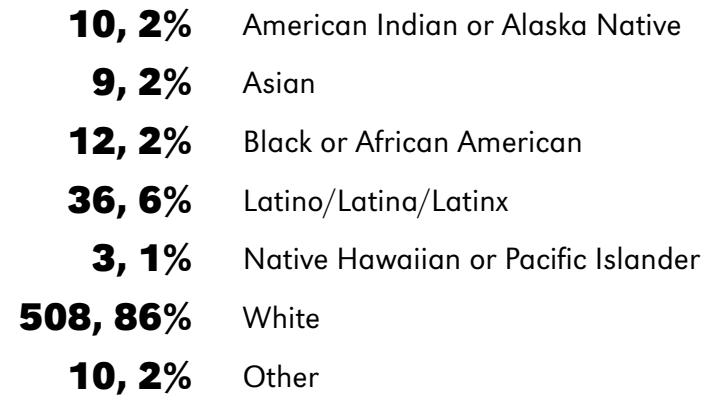
Note, not all respondents answered all questions, so the frequency of responses will vary from question to question.

SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

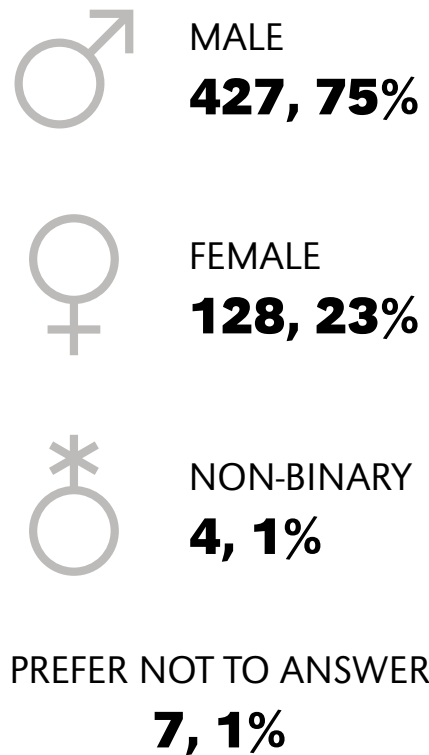
Age



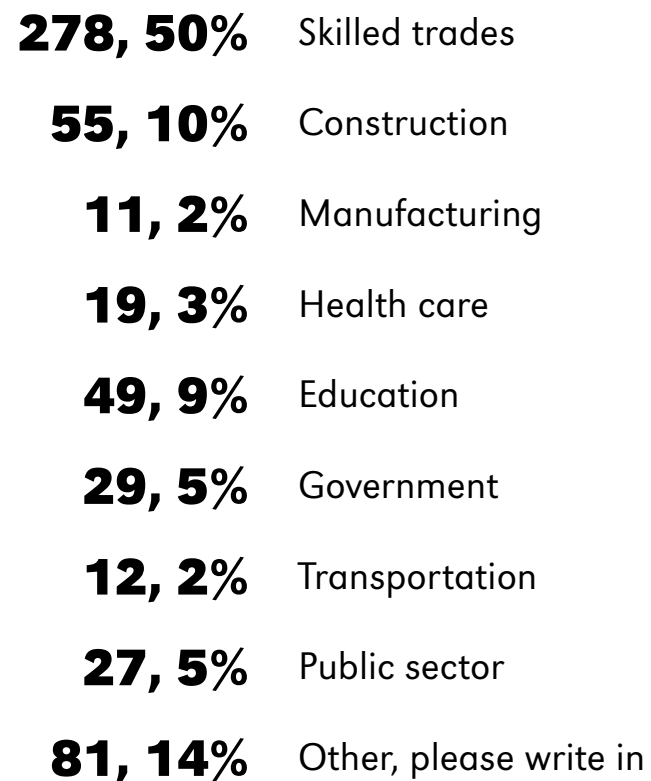
Race



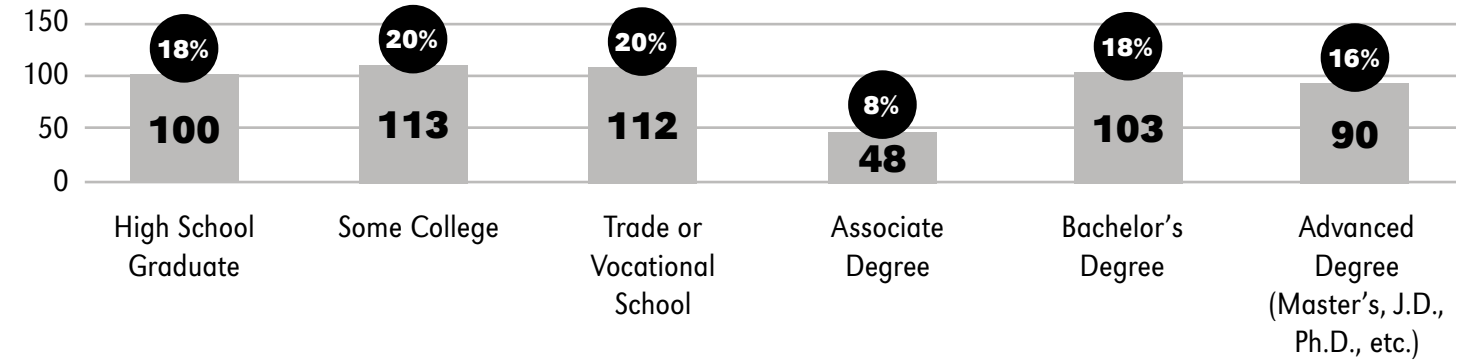
Gender



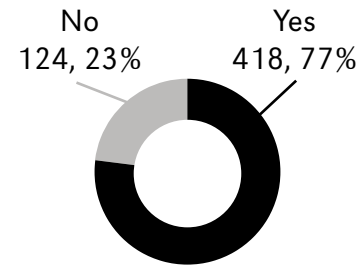
Industry



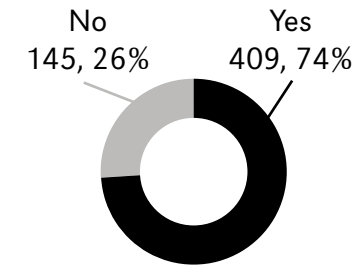
What is the highest level of education you have completed?



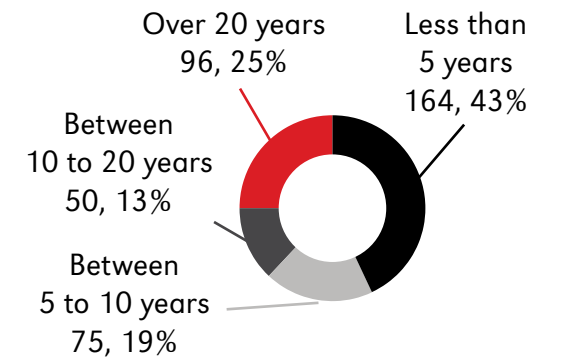
Is your workplace currently unionized?



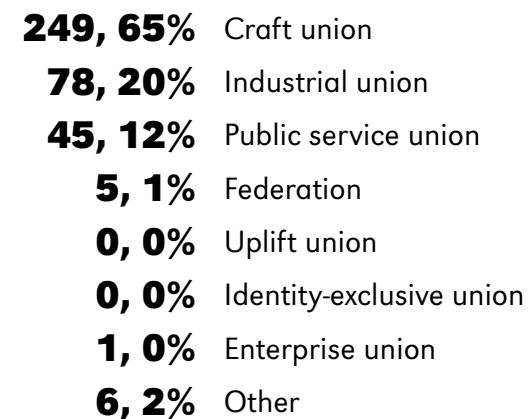
Are you currently a member of a union?



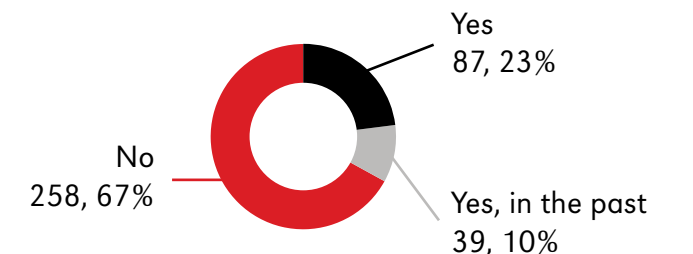
How long have you belonged to a labor union?



What type of union do you belong to?



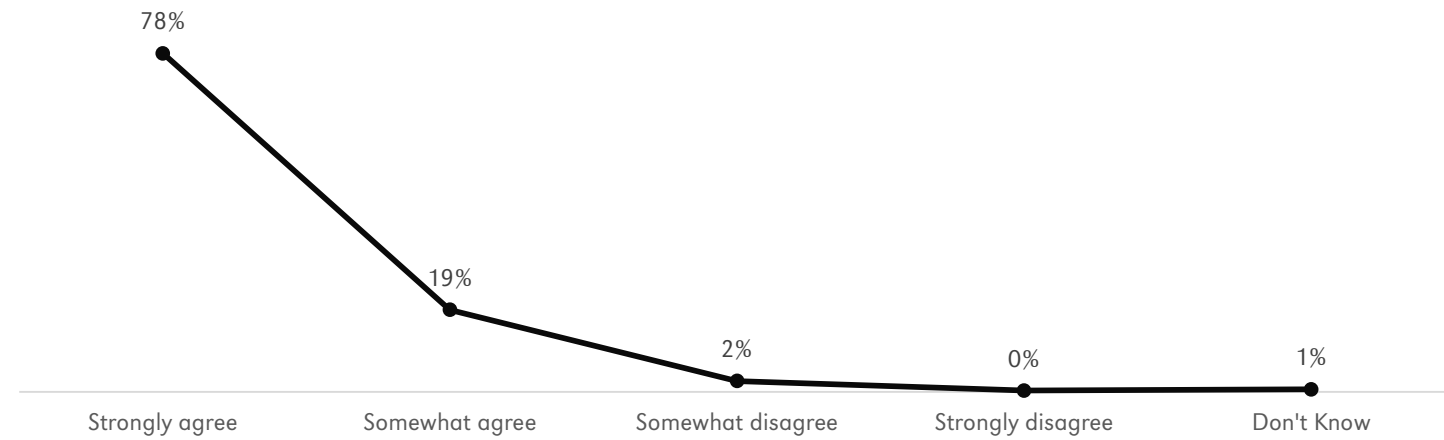
Do you currently hold or have you previously held a leadership position within your local union chapter?



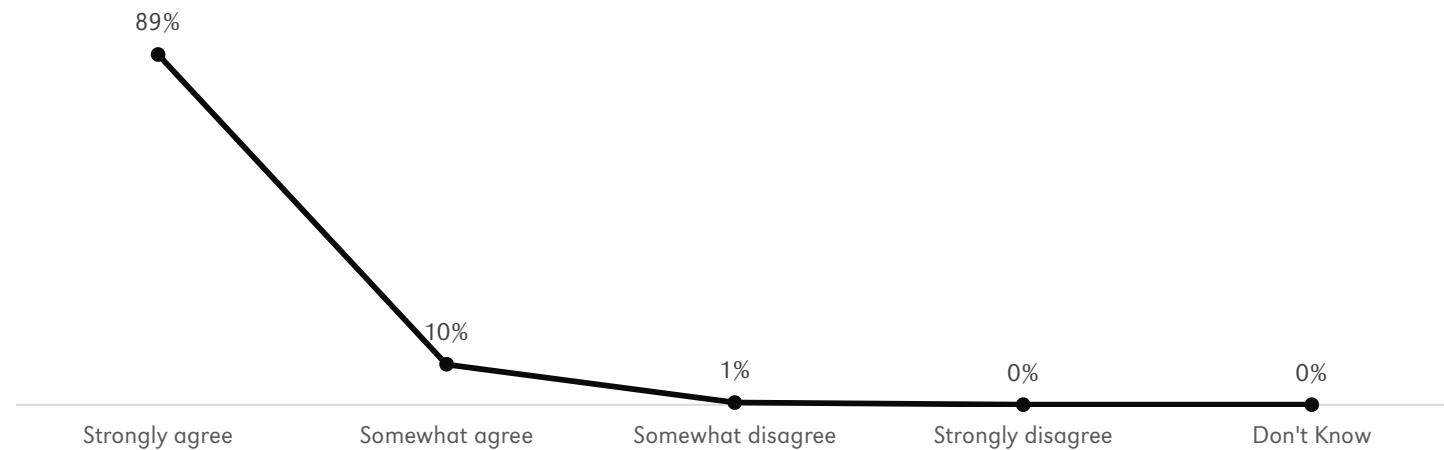
UNION ATTITUDES

The first section of the survey asked respondents to share their general attitudes toward unions and the potential benefits of being in a union. Respondents were asked to respond to a series of statements, on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Employees are considerably better off when they belong to a labor union.



I am glad that labor unions exist.



Please read the following statements and rate the degree to which you agree on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Strongly agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree Don't know

Unions are a positive force in this county.



Unions are a positive force in this state.



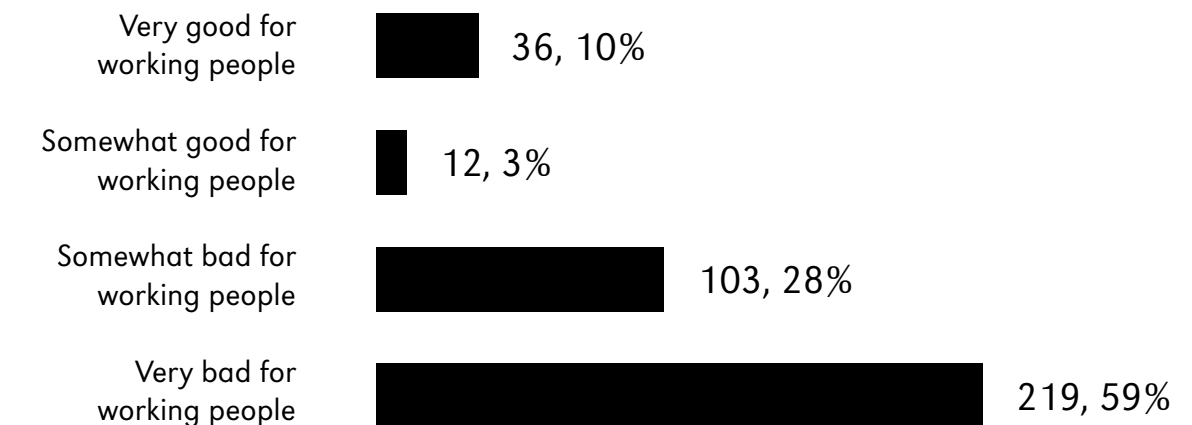
People would be worse off if there were no unions in this country.



Most people benefit from labor unions.

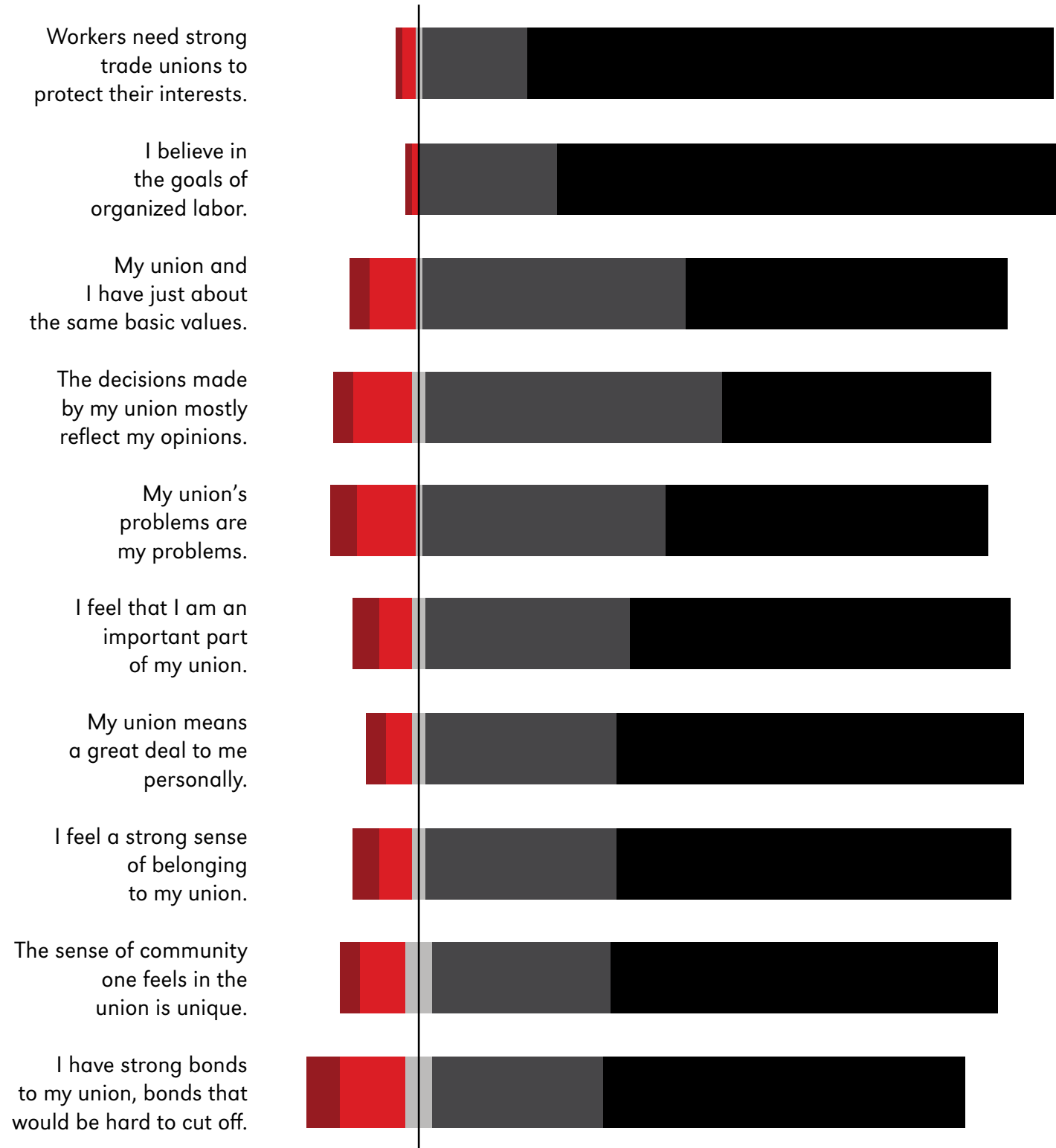


Over the past several decades there has been a large reduction in the percentage of workers who are represented by unions. Do you think this has been...



Please read the following statements and rate the degree to which you agree or disagree on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

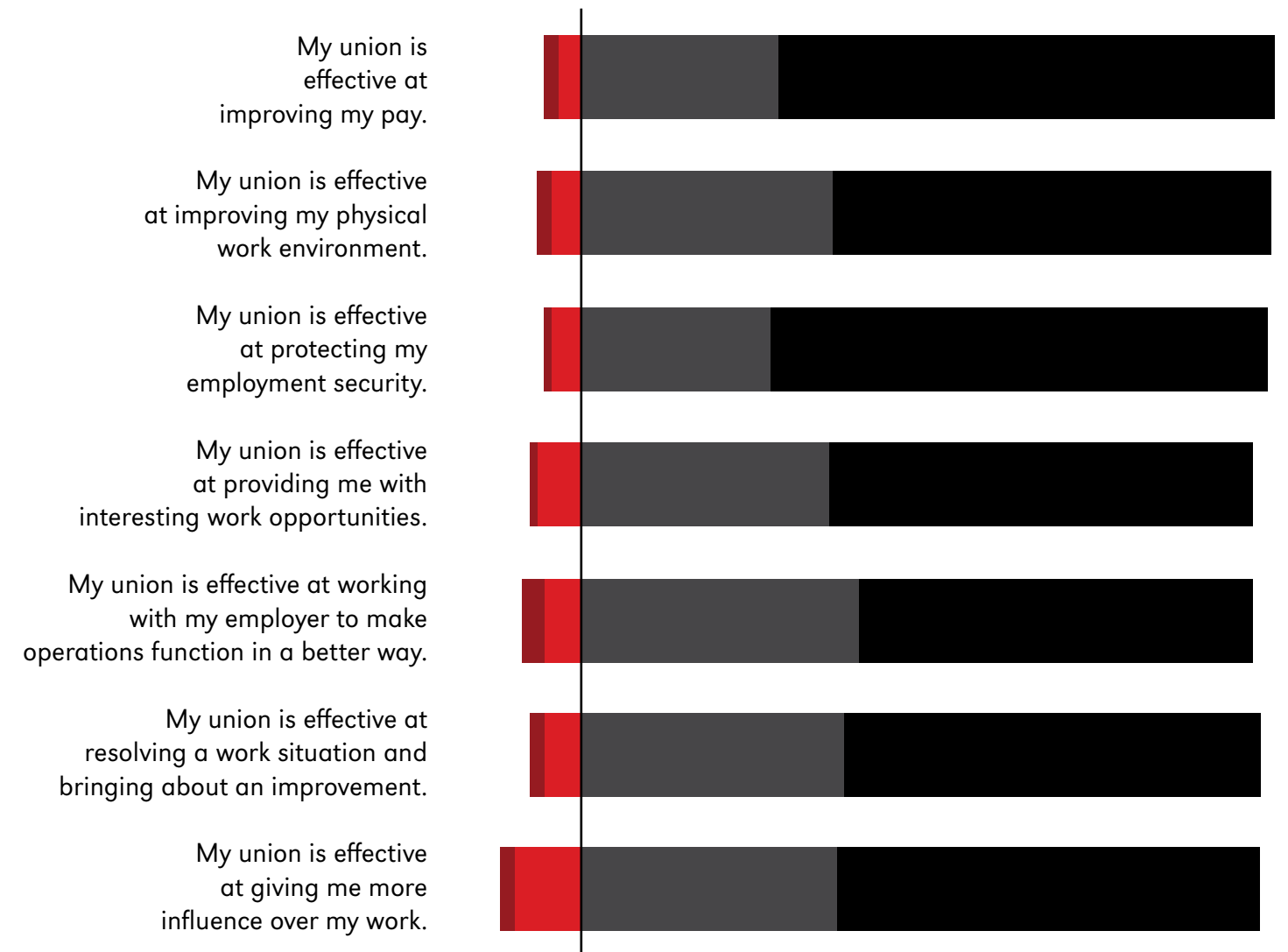
Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Don't know Somewhat agree Strongly agree



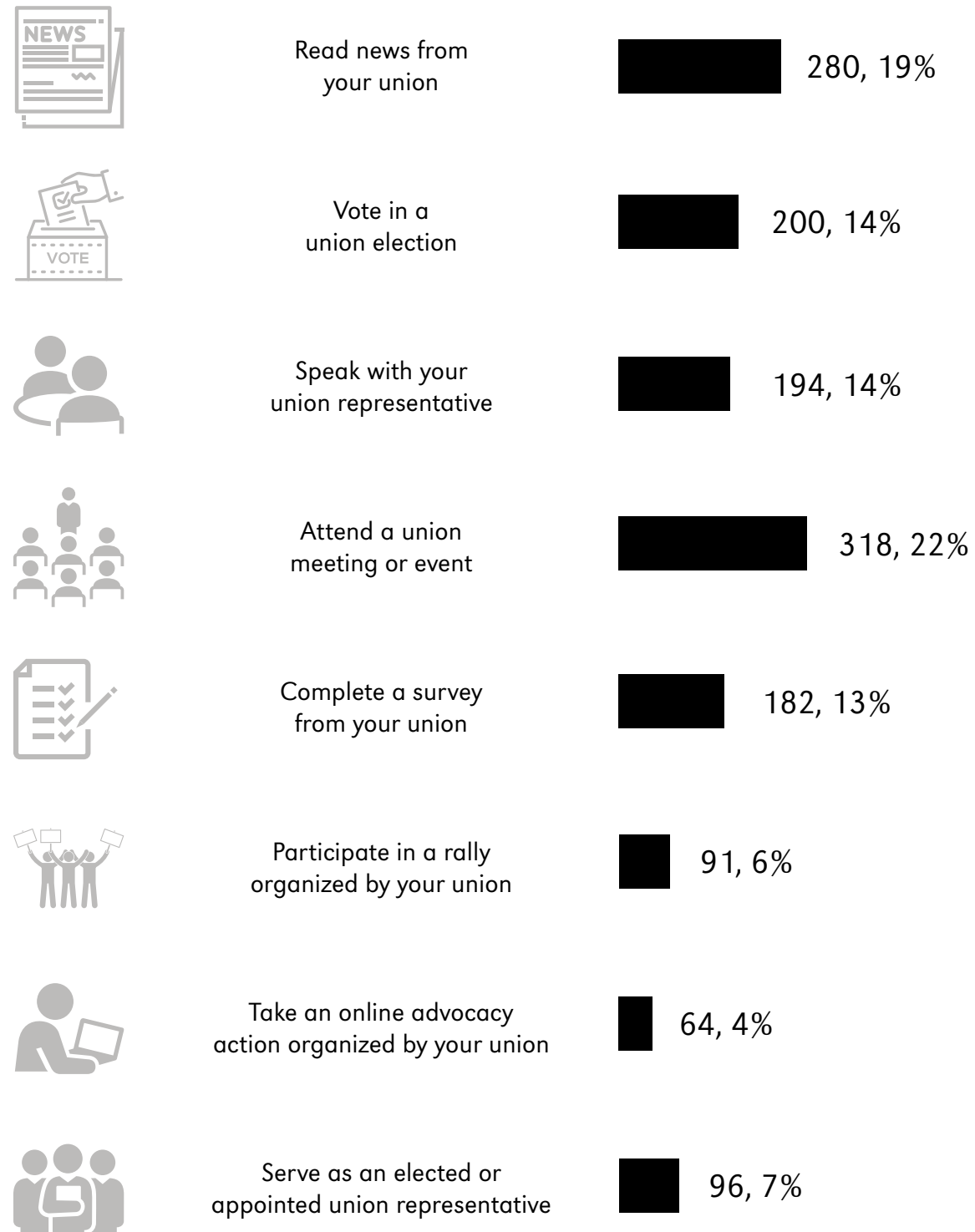
UNION EFFICACY

The second section of the survey asked respondents to share their general perceptions of union efficacy and how effective they believe unions are at protecting and improving workers' rights. Respondents were asked to respond to a series of statements, on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Strongly disagree Somewhat disagree Somewhat agree Strongly agree



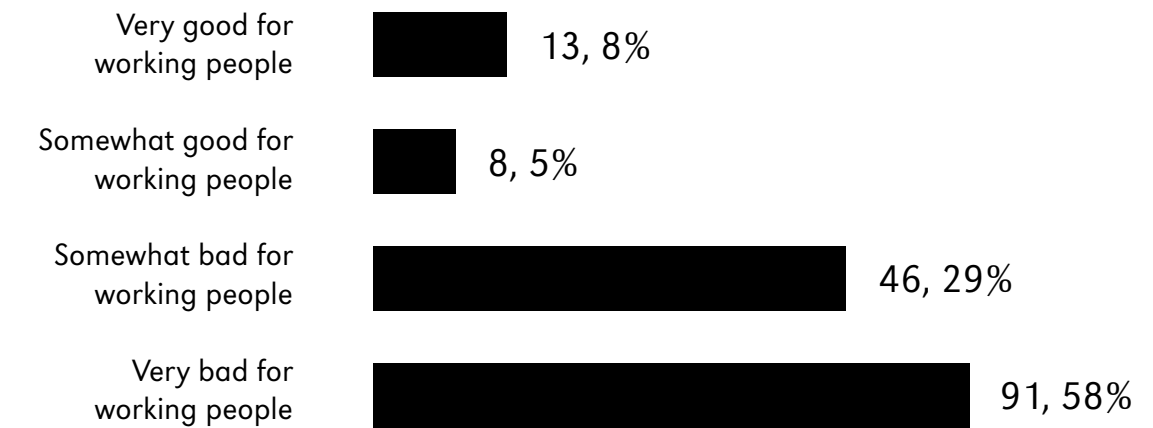
Which of the following union activities, if any, have you done in the past year? Select all that apply.



PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF UNIONS

In addition to surveying union members about their experience belonging to a union, the survey was also open to members of the public to gain a better understanding of their general perceptions of unions. In general, public perception of unions is positive.

Over the past several decades there has been a large reduction in the percentage of workers who are represented by unions. Do you think this has been...



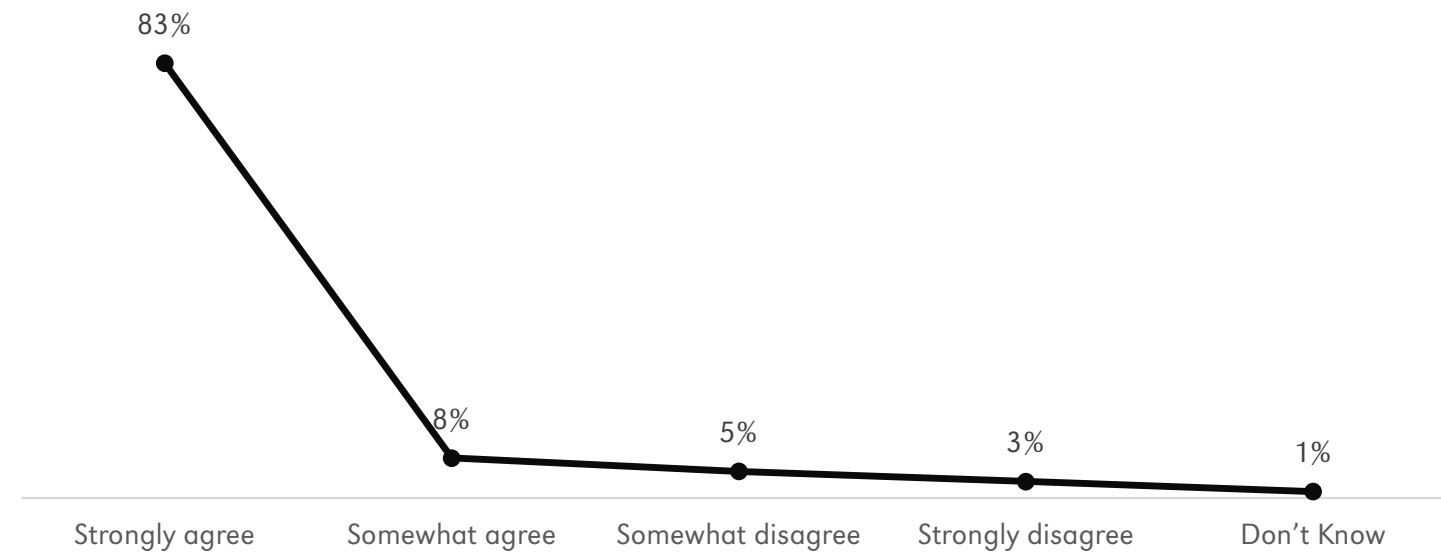
*Respondents are not in labor union



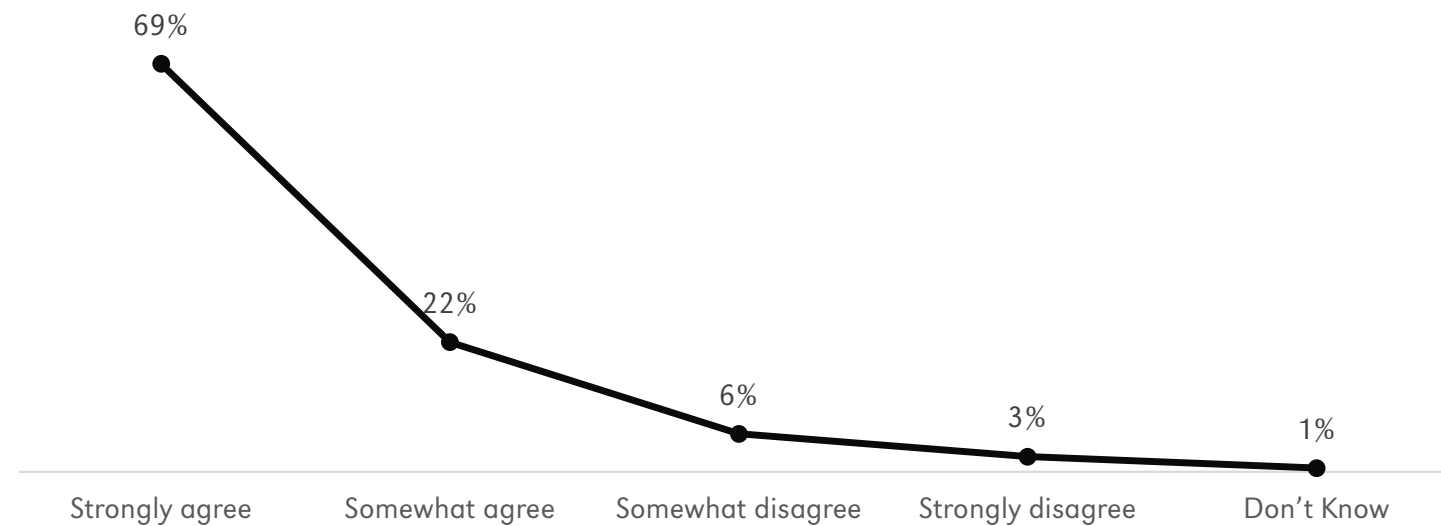
Jim Begley, director, UNO William Brennan Institute for Labor Studies, presenting Introduction to Organized Labor to Plumbers Local 16.

Please read the following statements and rate the degree to which you agree on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

People would be worse off if there were no unions in this country.



Most people benefit from labor unions.



*Respondents are not in labor union

Please read the following statements and rate the degree to which you agree on a scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

Strongly agree Somewhat agree Somewhat disagree Strongly disagree Don't know

Unions are a positive force in this county.



Unions are a positive force in this state.



I am glad that labor unions exist.

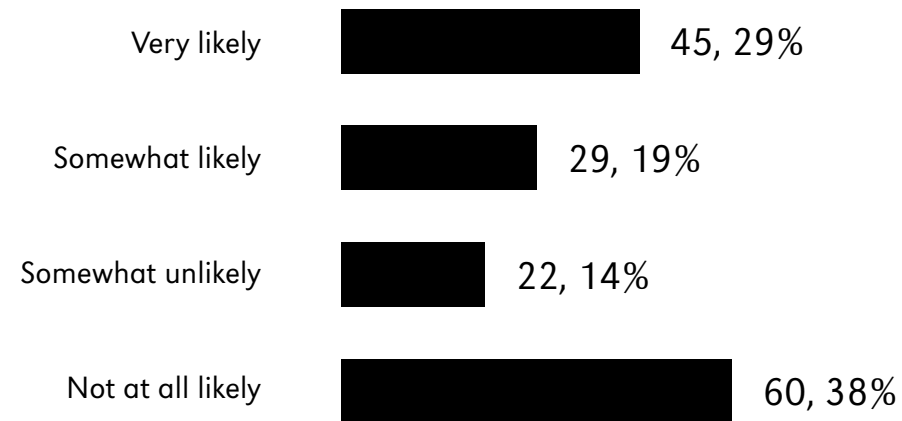


Employees are considerably better off when they belong to a labor union.



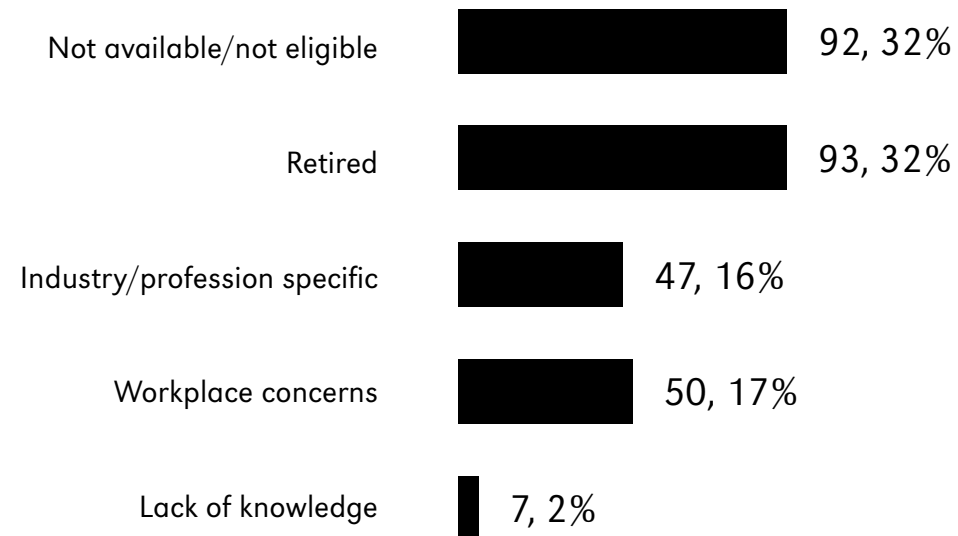
*Respondents are not in labor union

How likely are you to join a labor union in the future?



*Respondents are not in labor union

Please list 2 reasons why you choose not to be a member of a union.



*Respondents are not in labor union

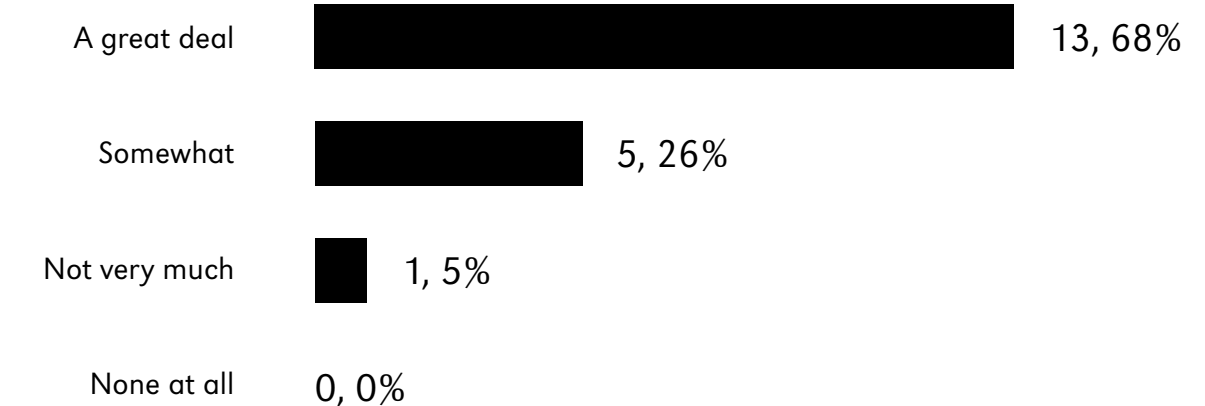
TEACHER UNIONS

Given the teacher workforce shortage and recent challenges in recruiting and retaining teachers in Nebraska (Peal, 2023), a portion of the survey was devoted to understanding attitudes toward teacher unions. For those respondents who identified their industry as education, they were asked an additional set of questions about teacher unions. These findings are reported below.

Do you think of teacher unions or associations as...?



To what degree do you believe that your perspective as a teacher is represented in policy decisions in your union?



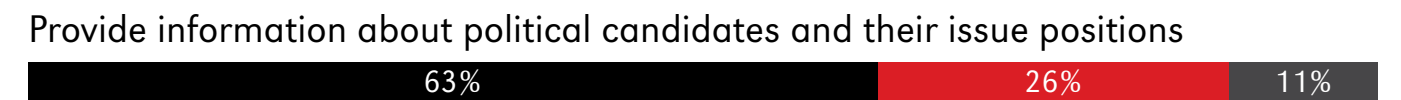
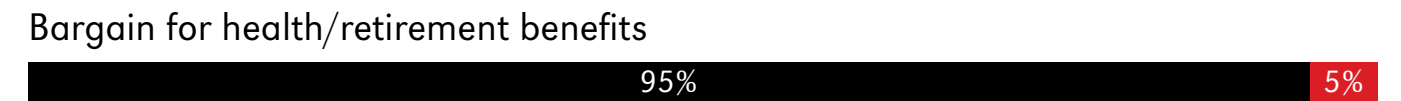
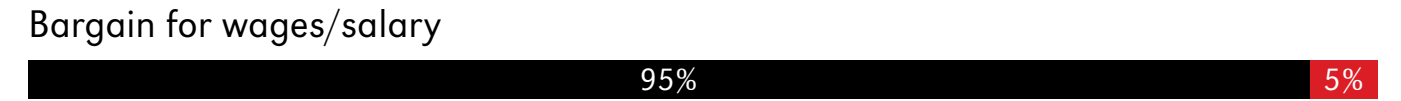
Do you agree or disagree with the following statement? Without a union, teachers would be vulnerable to school politics or administrators who abuse their power.



Jim Begley, director, William Brennan Institute for Labor Studies, presenting at the Midwest Nebraska Central Labor Council.

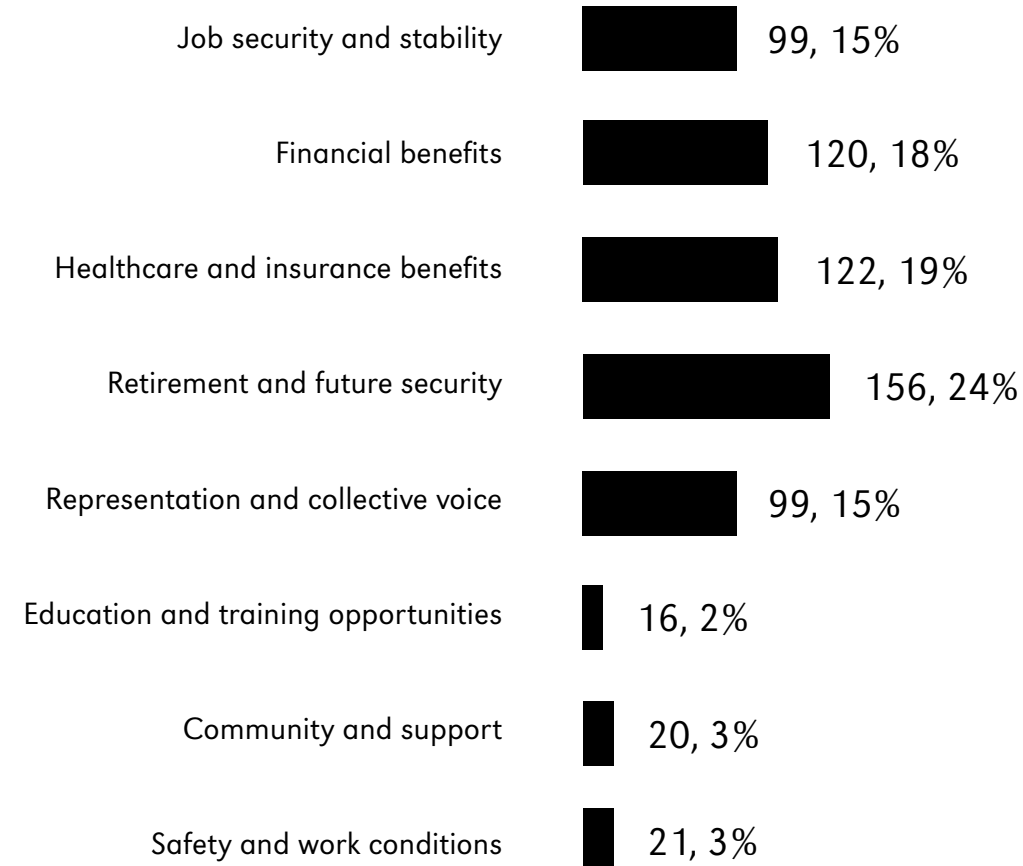
How important to you are each of the following for teacher unions to do?

Extremely important Very important Moderately important Slightly important Not important at all

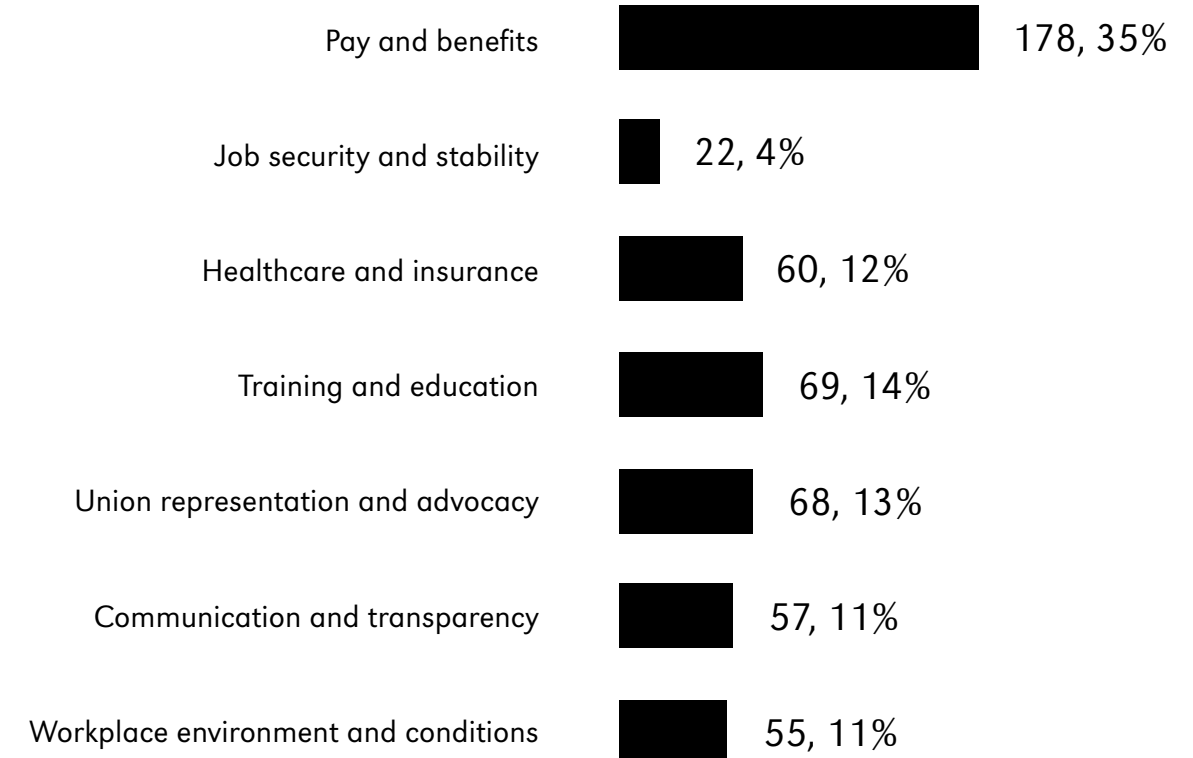


UNION BENEFITS AND DRAWBACKS

Please list 2 important benefits that you feel you receive as a member of your union.



Please list 2 areas of improvement based on your current labor experience.



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