

Earlier in this course, we talked about the changing role of labor unions and how the decline in union membership has contributed to the breakdown of the social contract. To understand this better, let's look at how union membership rates have changed since their peak in the 1950s, when almost one third of all employees belonged to a union.

By the early 1980s, around the time when we began to see the real effects of the breakdown of the social contract, union membership was already declining. And from then until now, it declined even more dramatically. In 2013, only 11% of 129 million working individuals in the US had a union on the job and collective bargaining network. Now, in the private sector, which employees most working individuals in the US, this percentage is even lower-- barely 7% of these workers in fast food, health care, or technology, for example, barely 7% have a union at work.

Now, labor leaders and scholars who study employment and labor unions argue that a number of factors have contributed to this decline in unions. Some argue, for example, that the structure of the economy plays a role, as growth in non-union sectors concentrated in service industries has outstripped growth in industries like construction and manufacturing where unions historically have been strong. Others point to the increased difficulty of organizing new membership, and in particular, to the legal obstacles that exist in implementing new agreements at work.

Recent research has found that only one in seven workplaces where workers have organized an election and voted for a union will actually see a contract in the year following their vote. And oftentimes, these types of elections are contentious. And in workplaces where employers have been charged with trying to discourage union activity through unfair labor practices, the odds go down by nearly a third. In addition to these economic and legal challenges, labor leaders and scholars also point to increased anti-union activity, not only by employers, but increasingly by policymakers, as we've seen in states like Wisconsin and Indiana, who are rolling back workers' rights to organize and collective bargaining agreements.

So over the past three decades, there's really been a shift, not only in how many people experience labor unions on the job, but in the way that we think about labor unions. In this course, we've talked about the social contract and what it means at work-- this idea that what's good for workers is good for businesses. And although we have examples of many good employers as discussed by Professor Zeynep Ton in her video, many employers act as though this idea is no longer the case-- that what's good for workers is not necessarily good for businesses, and that unions do not have a role in improving the way that firms work. At the same time, declining wages, less job security, and increased costs related to things like health care and student loans are making it more difficult for

working individuals. All of this adds up to a difficult environment, not only for labor unions, but also for individuals who try to protect their rights on the job.

The good news, however, is that over the past two decades, we've had a flurry of activity in organizing around economic justice in ways that are bringing employees' voices front and center. These include new strategies of labor unions to expand their membership and include more working people, the growth of worker centers and labor associations outside this realm, and the strengthening of employment policy through economic development. We've also seen a growing number of social movements that are highlighting the ways in which the social contract can be reestablished at work.

In the next video, we'll talk about each of these in a bit more detail.