

Major strike activity increased by 280% in 2023

Many workers still need policies that protect their
right to strike

By **Margaret Poydock** and **Jennifer Sherer** • February 21, 2024

Last year saw a resurgence in collective action among workers. More than 16.2 million workers were represented by unions in 2023, an increase of 191,000 from 2022. Workers filed petitions for union elections in record numbers and captured significant wage gains through work stoppages and contract negotiations. Further, organizing efforts continued in a variety of sectors—including health care, nonprofits, higher education, museums, retail, and manufacturing (Shierholz et al. 2024).

Strikes were among the more prominent forms of collective action in 2023. A strike is when workers withhold their labor from their employer during a labor dispute. By withholding their labor—labor that employers depend on to produce goods and provide services—workers can counteract existing power imbalances between themselves and their employer. Strikes provide critical leverage to workers when they bargain with employers over fair pay and working conditions, when employers violate labor law, or when employers refuse to voluntarily recognize unions.¹

Data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) show that 458,900 workers were involved in “major work stoppages” in 2023. The number of workers involved in major work stoppages increased by 280% in 2023, returning to levels last seen prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. These strikes included workers across the country—from auto workers to Hollywood writers and actors, nurses, and public school teachers.

A common theme among strikes in 2023 was a demand for higher pay amid the inflationary shocks stemming from pandemic re-opening, global crises, record profits for many corporations, and stratospheric CEO pay. Related motivations for striking included decades of stagnant wages, eroded health care and retirement benefits, long work hours, and unsafe working conditions (Bivens et al. 2023; Dickler 2023). It should be no surprise that workers are taking collective action to improve their pay and working conditions—but we should be asking why it is happening now. The U.S. economy has churned out unequal income growth and stagnant wages for the last several decades. Research shows that unions and collective bargaining are key tools in combating income

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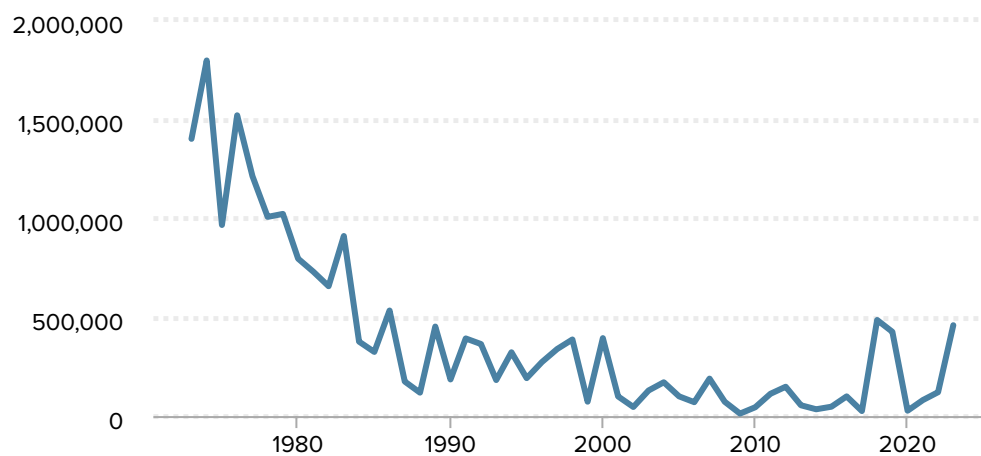
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Figure A

Number of workers involved in major work stoppages, 1973–2023



Notes: The Bureau of Labor Statistics does not distinguish between strikes and lockouts in its work stoppage data. However, lockouts (which are initiated by management) are rare relative to strikes, so it is reasonable to think of the major work stoppage data as a proxy for data on major strikes. Data are for public- and private-sector workers.

Source: Bureau of Labor Statistics, “[Work Stoppages Summary](#)” (news release), February 21, 2024, and [related table](#), “Annual Work Stoppages Involving 1,000 or More Workers, 1947–Present.”

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inequality and improving the pay, benefits, and working conditions for both union and nonunion workers (Bivens et al. 2023). However, the continued rise in collective action is not likely to increase unionization substantially unless meaningful policy change is enacted to ensure all workers have the right to form unions, bargain collectively, and strike.

In this brief, we highlight work stoppages that occurred in 2023 and discuss what policies are needed to strengthen the right to strike in the United States.

Major work stoppages data

The Bureau of Labor Statistics defines “major work stoppages” as those involving at least 1,000 workers and lasting one full work shift between Monday–Friday, excluding federal holidays. BLS data show that 458,900 workers were involved in 33 major work stoppages that began and ended in 2023 (BLS 2024c). This is an increase of over 280% from the number of workers involved in major worker stoppages in 2022, which was 120,600. Further, it is on par with the increase seen in pre-pandemic levels during 2018 and 2019, as shown in **Figure A**.

Roughly 75% of major work stoppages in 2023 (25 of them) took place in the private sector, with over half (14) occurring in a health care setting. State government accounted for five major work stoppages, with the majority of those involving public colleges and

universities. Local government accounted for three major work stoppages, which involved public elementary schools.

Examples of major work stoppages in 2023

The work stoppages data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics include a breakdown of the organizations at which major work stoppages occurred. The data, combined with an EPI review of publicly available sources, suggest a range of strike activity in 2023. Recurring themes of major stoppages occurring in 2023 include workers citing decades of stagnant real (inflation-adjusted) wages; erosion of health insurance or retirement benefits; long work hours; and dangerous or stressful working conditions as motivations for seeking significant improvements to wages, benefits, and working conditions. The following are examples of major work stoppages covered by the BLS data.

United Auto Workers “Stand Up” strike

On September 15, 2023, more than 12,000 workers went on strike at General Motors, Ford, and Stellantis after their contract expired. The workers—represented by the United Auto Workers—went on strike to secure better pay and benefits after previous concessions in contracts following the Great Recession. Between 2013 and 2023, the three automakers had seen their profits rise by \$250 billion, while the UAW members had not seen a cost-of-living adjustment since 2009 (Hersh 2023).

During the work stoppage, the UAW operated under a “Stand Up Strike” strategy. Instead of having all 150,000 members go on strike at the same time, they selected specific worksites to strike with additional worksites at the ready to “stand up” and join the strike as negotiations continued with the three automakers (UAW 2024). Overall, approximately 53,000 workers participated in the work stoppage. The work stoppages marked the first time the UAW had gone on strike at all three automakers at the same time.

The strike concluded after two months once the United Auto Workers and General Motors, Ford, and Stellantis reached agreements that included raises of at least 33% for all workers, the elimination of a two-tier wage system, the re-opening of a previously shuttered Stellantis plant, a commitment to a just transition with electric vehicles, and annual bonuses for retirees (UAW 2023). Further, nonunion workers have seen spillover effects of the UAW gains. For example, Toyota, Honda, Hyundai, and Tesla raised wages for their U.S. workers (none of whom are unionized) shortly after the UAW reached a tentative agreement with General Motors, Ford, and Stellantis (Brooks 2023; Kolodny 2024).

Kaiser Permanente health care workers strike

In October 2023, more than 75,000 Kaiser Permanente health care workers represented by a coalition of multiple unions engaged in the largest recorded health care strike in U.S. history (Isidore and Delouya 2023). The three-day strike included nurses, medical technicians, and support staff at hundreds of Kaiser facilities in seven states and the

District of Columbia, with the largest groups of Kaiser workers on strike in California (Reuters 2023).

Like many health care strikes in recent years, the Kaiser workers' strike drew attention to union proposals to address lagging pay and an ongoing staffing crisis. Following the three-day strike, workers achieved a tentative agreement with Kaiser that included 21% across-the-board pay increases over four years; additional bonus and performance sharing pay; and new training, education, and hiring initiatives to increase staffing levels. The resulting agreement, ratified by over 98% of members in November 2023, also set a new minimum wage for Kaiser health care workers of \$23 (increasing to \$25 by 2026) in California and \$21 (increasing to \$23 by 2026) in all other states covered by the contract (Coalition of Kaiser Permanente Unions 2023).

University of Michigan graduate employees strike

In March 2023, approximately 2,200 workers at the University of Michigan went on strike. The workers, represented by the Graduate Employees' Organization (GEO) Local 3550, include graduate student instructors and graduate student assistants across three campuses. The workers voted to go on strike to improve their pay and benefits and gain harassment protections and safer working conditions (P. Lucas 2023).

The strike was contentious, resulting in both the GEO and the University of Michigan filing unfair labor practices charges against one another. The charges were ultimately settled between the two parties (Anderson 2023).

The five-month strike concluded when the Graduate Employees' Organization and the University of Michigan agreed to a new three-year contract that included major pay increases across the three campuses, harassment protections, paid childbirth leave, health insurance coverage for gender affirming care, and a \$1,000 signing bonus (Bruckner 2023; Mackay 2023). The strike was the longest major work stoppage in 2023 and the longest strike in the history of the union and university (Bruckner 2023). The University of Michigan strike is an example of the growing wave of labor actions among graduate student workers in recent years (Bivens et al. 2023).

Starbucks Workers United 'Red Cup Day' strikes

On November 16, 2023, more than 5,000 Starbucks workers went on strike in protest of the company's refusal to bargain in good faith to reach a first contract. The one-day strike was organized to coincide with Starbucks' "Red Cup Day" promotion, which historically is one of the company's busiest days. The 2023 Red Cup Day strike was Starbucks Workers United's largest work stoppage to date, involving more than 5,000 workers across 200 stores (Durbin 2023).

Since December 2021, workers in 43 states, at 391 of Starbucks's U.S.-based company-owned stores, have voted to unionize (More Perfect Union 2024). For more than two years, Starbucks has refused to bargain in good faith and has not reached a first contract with any of its unionized stores. During that time, the National Labor Relations Board

officials have issued 105 complaints alleging the company violated labor law, including a nationwide case charging Starbucks with illegal failure to bargain with unionized workers in stores across the country (Saxena 2023). Shortly after the 2023 Red Cup Day strike, Starbucks announced that it wanted to resume talks with Starbucks Workers United to reach a first contract in 2024 (A. Lucas 2023).

Work stoppages that do not appear in the BLS data

The Bureau of Labor Statistics data on work stoppages, while useful, have a major limitation: They only include information on work stoppages (both strikes and lockouts), involving 1,000 or more workers and lasting one full work shift between Monday–Friday, excluding federal holidays. An enormous amount of information is missed by restricting the data in this way. According to BLS data on firm size, nearly three-fifths (58%) of private-sector workers are employed by firms with fewer than 1,000 employees (BLS 2024b). Yet any strike activity by these workers would not be captured in the Bureau of Labor Statistics work stoppages data. For example, a six-week strike involving 750 Temple University graduate student workers was not captured in the 2023 data, because it did not meet the size limitations of the BLS (AP 2023).

These size and duration limits mean that the Bureau of Labor Statistics data are not capturing many workers who walked off the job in 2023 to demand fair pay and safe working conditions. While the BLS data show 33 major work stoppages occurred in 2023, Cornell’s ILR Labor Action Tracker shows 470 work stoppages—466 strikes and 4 lockouts—occurring in 2023 (Ritchie, Kallas, Iyer 2024).

Conclusion: Federal and state action is needed to ensure the right to strike

The 2023 BLS data on major work stoppages show that over 450,000 workers exercised the right to strike to pursue pay increases, better benefits, and safer working conditions. However, the fact remains that current labor law does not adequately protect workers’ fundamental right to strike. The following are federal policies that would strengthen workers’ right to join unions and bargain collectively.

- The Richard L. Trumka Protecting the Right to Organize (PRO) Act includes critical reforms that would strengthen private-sector workers’ right to strike. The PRO Act would expand the scope for strikes by eliminating the prohibition on secondary strikes and allowing the use of intermittent strikes. It would also strengthen workers’ ability to strike by prohibiting employers from permanently replacing striking workers.
- The Striking and Locked Out Workers Healthcare Protection Act would prevent employers from cutting off health coverage of workers and family members in retaliation against striking workers.

- The Food Secure Strikers Act would allow striking workers to qualify for Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits.
- Congress should also pursue policies that extend a fully protected right to strike to railway, airline, public-sector, agricultural, and domestic workers. None of these workers has the fundamental right to strike under current federal law.

Exclusions of public-sector, domestic, and agricultural workers from coverage under federal labor law mean that the basic union rights of millions of workers in these occupations remain left up to states. To address a significant portion of these exclusions, Congress should, as a first step, pass the Public Service Freedom to Negotiate Act, establishing a minimum standard of collective bargaining rights that all states and localities must provide for public employees.

In the absence of congressional action, states should ensure collective bargaining rights and protect the right to strike for all public-sector, agricultural, and domestic workers. Right now, only a dozen states grant limited rights to strike to some public-sector workers. States should also join New York and New Jersey in making striking workers eligible for unemployment benefits (Perez 2024).

Note

1. For further explanation on the types and limitations of strikes, see Bivens et al. 2023.

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