

Union Jobs Plummet in the Private Sector

By Patrick McGeehan, New York Times

September 4, 2012

New York City has regained all of the jobs it lost during the last recession, but its labor unions have not, and the steep decline in the last several years may signal a lasting erosion of one of the few remaining bastions of union power, according to the authors of a report to be released this week.

The number of city residents with union jobs in the private sector has dropped by nearly 20 percent since the recession started in 2008, the report by scholars at the City University of New York shows. That amounts to a loss of about 95,000 union jobs, and a decline twice as steep as that for the rest of the nation, said Ruth Milkman, a sociology professor who wrote the report with Laura Braslow.

“This is a big decrease,” Professor Milkman said, and she said it was unlikely to turn around anytime soon. Indeed, as the city’s private sector has added jobs at a healthy rate for much of the past two years, the number of union jobs in the public sector rose but private-sector unions did not rebound, she said.

The study coincided with a report from the Fiscal Policy Institute that found that most of the jobs that have been created in the city during the economic recovery have been in industries that tend to pay low wages, including restaurants, retail and home health care.

James Parrott, chief economist for the institute, which is supported by labor unions, noted that the deep slump in construction in the city has taken a toll on unions. According to his report, “The State of Working New York 2012,” the number of construction jobs in the city has declined by 23,000 in the past four years.

In the boom years that preceded the financial crisis, as many as one in five city residents who worked in the private sector belonged to a union. Since the long recession set off by that crisis took hold, that proportion has dropped to about one in eight, according to the CUNY report.

“I saw this happen in California in the 1990s,” Professor Milkman said. Such a sharp decline is difficult to turn around because the businesses created after a recession are less likely to be unionized than the older ones that failed in the downturn, she said.

The authors of the CUNY study are affiliated with the university’s Joseph S. Murphy Institute for Worker Education and Labor Studies and its Center for Urban Research.

New York remains one of the last union strongholds in the private sector, and both the state and the city have higher numbers of unionized workers than any other state or big city. But those ranks are dwindling and the weakened position of unions has been evident in some closely watched labor disputes in the past year, Professor Milkman said.

She cited the strike by Verizon employees in August 2011 that lasted two weeks but still has not led to a new contract, and the move by Consolidated Edison this summer to lock out all 8,000 members of its biggest union, Local 1-2 of the Utility Workers Union of America.

Mike Filippou experienced the trend personally after years of repairing and maintaining equipment at the Stella D'oro bakery in the Bronx, where workers made \$18 to \$22 an hour. He lost that job in 2009 when the bakery's owners decided to shut it down following a strike that lasted almost a year.

After more than six months out of work, Mr. Filippou found another union position in a bakery, but he had to look out of state to find it. He now works in an Arnold bread bakery in Greenwich, Conn., earning about as much as he did at Stella D'oro but with a less valuable pension.

"It's terrible what's happening," Mr. Filippou said. "In another 10 or 15 years, there's going to be no unions left. Every union is losing members. Every company doesn't want a union, doesn't want to pay union rates."

Another longtime Stella D'oro employee, Eddie Marrero, is now a nonunion security guard in an office building on Park Avenue in Manhattan after two years out of work, earning less than he did at the bakery and with no benefits.

"I don't think there ever will be another job like Stella D'oro," Mr. Marrero, 53, said.

The union local that represented the Stella D'oro workers — Local 50 of the Bakery, Confectionery, Tobacco Workers and Grain Millers International Union — lost so many members that it had to merge into another local, Mr. Filippou said.

The manufacturing sector, which has been on the decline in the city for decades, shed both union and nonunion jobs during the recession, the CUNY report shows. But union membership also shrank in several industries that have added significant numbers of jobs, the report shows.

Professor Milkman cited the tourism-driven hospitality sector, which has grown throughout the city. But, she added, most new hotels do not employ union members.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 13, 2012

An article on Sept. 4 about the decline of union jobs in the private sector in New York City misstated the number of construction jobs that the city had lost in the past four years. It was 23,000, according to the Fiscal Policy Institute, not 59,000 (that is the number lost statewide).