



Unions fight back against Kochs and allies since supreme court 'disaster'

Janus decision stopped unions collecting 'fair-share fees' but fresh organizing efforts mean many shops are on the up

Mike Elk

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After decades of trying, the Koch brothers and their allies won a major battle last year when the US supreme court stripped public sector unions of their ability to collect "fair-share fees" from non-union members.

Anti-union forces lobbied long and hard for such a decision. And experts predicted *Janus v AFSCME* could strip public sectors of a third of their revenues as millions stopped paying union dues for collective bargaining and other activities.

Seven months on from the decision, the picture is mixed. But there are signs that *Janus* may have served as a wake-up call, reinvigorating organizing campaigns and leading to gains for some unions.

This Friday, the heads of America's four largest public sector unions meet at a summit in Washington. They plan to outline calls for more strikes and major organizing initiatives, riding a wave of popular support from the teachers' strikes. And they feel emboldened to push for more.

The American Federation of Teachers president, Randi Weingarten, said: "Our members have sent a clear message to the anti-labor rightwing ideologues: we are sticking with the union. While the right wing has many acts left in their playbook, the *Janus* supreme court and follow-up assaults have backfired."

She said: "These attacks will continue but our members - and the American labor movement as a whole - are determined to stare them down and emerge stronger than ever."

While overall union membership was down last year from 11.9% to 11.7%, public sector unions lost only 0.5% of their membership (within the margin of error). However, Bureau of Labor Statistics data and preliminary filings made to the Department of Labor show that in many places public sector unions have actually made gains.

"*Janus* hasn't had any effect at all on us," said the Kentucky AFL-CIO president, Bill Londrigan, whose state gained 5,000 new public union members after a series of dramatic teachers' strikes last spring. "We find public sector unions are being more effective at organizing internally, they are being aggressive, and they are being effective at communicating with their members."

Many states that saw teachers' strikes have added members. Arizona added 24,000 new members in the public sector. Oklahoma added 16,000, Colorado 19,000, and Washington state added 35,000 members.

However, some unions did lose members. California lost 100,000 union members, New Jersey lost 30,000 members, and Michigan lost 30,000 - states that didn't have political mobilizations as large as those in Oklahoma and Arizona.

"What we are seeing is that in states where there was a major fightback, union numbers are up," said Eileen Applebaum of the Center for Economic and Policy Research.

To prepare for Janus, many unions ran massive educational programs to reinvigorate a culture of organizing; not just averting disaster but putting many unions in a position to make gains in membership as public support grows for striking teachers and other public employees.

Illinois was supposed to be ground zero for the attack on organized labor following the Janus case.

The anti-union Illinois Policy Institute even hired Mark Janus, the lead plaintiff in Janus v AFSCME case, to work full-time as a union-buster trying to persuade his former fellow state employees to drop their union membership. The former Illinois governor Bruce Rauner sent out repeated statewide email blasts encouraging state employees to drop their union membership.

However, the opposite happened: many unions in Illinois actually gained members as a result of the Janus decision.

Union leaders across Illinois held tens of thousands of one-on-one meetings with individual state workers to talk to them about their union and how they could get more involved. The meetings actually persuaded many state workers, who had previously only paid reduced fair-share fees, to increase their dues to full membership.

"Janus backfired. Our union is as strong, if not stronger, than before," said Carlene Erno, a child protective service worker and president of AFSCME Local 2615, whose local increased their membership from 90% to 95%.



The AFT president, Randy Weingarten. Photograph: Jeff Swensen/Getty Images

Public sector union leaders said that the changes in organizing culture their unions undertook to prepare for Janus have put them in a position to actually make gains.

"We were complacent for a while," said the Education Minnesota president, Denise Specht, where public union membership increased by 5.4%. "People signed up when they were new to a school district or a building. For many educators, that was the first and last time they talked to their union - and now times are absolutely different."

"I always tell people: if you treat your union solely like an insurance policy then so will your members," said Dave Coker, the president of the Professional Firefighters of Greensboro Union.

"What I ask people is: how loyal are you to your homeowners or your auto insurance? When you set up that sort of customer ideology, if that's the narrative, you're aren't building loyalty, you aren't building educated union members, you are building a customer service relationship," said Coker.

"In a 'right-to-work' environment like ours, we are only successful when our members engage. We judge ourselves as union leaders by how engaged our membership is."

Public sector unions across the country say not only have they gained members, they have also built political power.

"It brought us together in a strong way, and it unified our union from every corner of the state," said Specht, whose Minnesota teachers' union was able to maintain 93% of its membership while also organizing 30 new bargaining units, primarily as a result of member-to-member organizing in the lead-up to Janus.

"It is really translating into a lot of things. Not just how are we going to be able to preserve a union, but how does this help us in politics," said Specht, whose union erased a 20-seat majority to take back the Minnesota legislature and also helped elect a former educator, Tim Walz, as governor.

"In the 2018 election, we had more activism and engagement than ever before and I believe that our work pre-Janus set us up for so much success in Minnesota."

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