

## Australia's Unions Face Decline Despite Membership Gains

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Tens of thousands of unionists marched through Brisbane on May 5, marking Labour Day celebrations shortly after the Australian Labor Party's federal election victory. The event drew participation from several Labor MPs, including Ali France and Murray Watt, reflecting the close ties between the party and organized labor.

The march coincided with modest increases in union membership across Australia. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), union density rose from 12.5 percent in August 2022 to 13.1 percent in August 2024, representing nearly 200,000 additional members across both public and private sectors. Young workers drove much of this growth, with membership among 15- to 24-year-olds rising 53 percent and 25- to 34-year-olds increasing by 22 percent.

Despite these gains, broader trends indicate continuing challenges. The largest increases in membership occurred in health care, social assistance, and construction sectors sensitive to government policy changes and potential economic downturns. Overall, the 0.6 percent increase in union density remains modest compared to historical levels. Once comparable to Nordic countries, Australian unions now more closely resemble the US in density.

The construction sector has faced recent upheaval. In September 2024, federal legislation placed the Construction, Forestry, Maritime, Mining and Energy Union (CFMEU) Construction Division into five-year administration, resulting in some branches losing nearly

20 percent of their members. A High Court challenge to the legislation by former CFMEU officials was unanimously rejected on June 18, establishing a precedent for future government interventions.

Industrial action remains historically low. ABS data for the March 2025 quarter show just 13,900 working days lost, continuing a trend over the past decade. In comparison, the 1970s and 1980s saw over two million working days lost annually. Union leadership has largely focused on political engagement and parliamentary lobbying rather than industrial action, reflecting a strategy that prioritizes electoral influence over shop-floor organization.

Internal divisions have also emerged. In response to the CFMEU administration, the Communications, Electrical, Energy and Plumbing Union (CEPU) disaffiliated from the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU). Breakaway groups, including Trade Unions for Democracy, have sought to coordinate reform efforts across various unions, though outcomes remain uncertain.

Nonetheless, there are signs of renewal. Rank-and-file campaigns in Victoria and South Australia have successfully challenged incumbent union leadership, promoting increased member participation in decision-making. Industrial actions by fast-food and retail workers, including strikes at Grill'd, Woolworths, and other workplaces, demonstrate a willingness among younger unionists to engage directly in labor disputes.

While the Australian union movement faces structural challenges, these examples indicate potential for future organizational reforms and increased engagement among emerging union members.