

Labour Day: Union members boost the benefits of organized labour, but almost 40% say membership costs exceed gains

Public sector union members say NDP best for them, private union members split between NDP/CPC

September 1, 2023 – Ahead of Labour Day this year, many Canadians are taking stock of what has been a busy – and, at times, challenging – year for organized workers in this country.

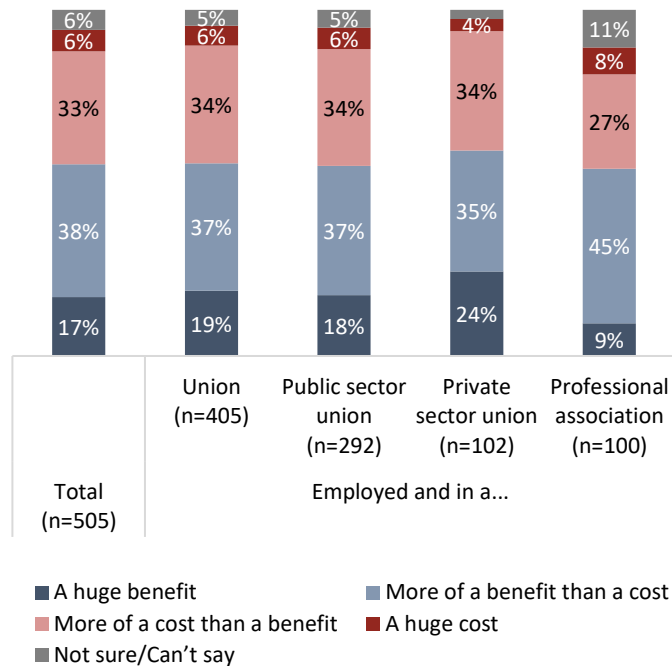
A federal worker strike – [the largest in the nation's history](#) – made headlines this spring, followed by threats from WestJet employees in May (resolved before action was taken). The port worker strike in British Columbia carried more twists and turns than construction of a new highway. Grocery workers in Toronto, broadcasters at TV Ontario and employees at Manitoba Liquor and Lotteries also took prolonged job action this summer, [just to name a few](#).

A new study from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute dives deep into perceptions of labour unions, finding a nation with competing views about the value and cost of organized work in Canada, among union members and non-members alike.

Overall, Canadians largely feel that unions have had a positive impact for those they represent. Three-in-five say this, approximately three-times as many as say the impact has been a net negative. The cost-benefit calculation is more divided when considering the impact of unions on the country's economy as a whole. Two-in-five say this impact is a positive one while three-in-ten say it has been negative.

Workers themselves have their own experiences. For most, union membership has been a plus. Three-in-five members of both public (62%) and private (63%) sector unions say they're satisfied with the representation they receive. Half as many say they're dissatisfied, suggesting there is plenty of room for improvement.

And overall, given the costs and benefits of union membership, how much of a benefit has this been for you personally? (Among current union/PA members)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from August 25 - 29, 2023 among a representative randomized sample of 2,023 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#). For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

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Progress may come from more than one area. Overall, among those who have gone to a union representative for assistance, three-in-ten (30%) say they did not feel supported. Women are slightly more likely to say they did not feel supported (36%) than men (30%). Further, when they think about the costs of membership and the benefits they receive, two-in-five union members (39%) say they do not receive adequate benefit for what they pay.

Asked which of the main federal political parties they think is currently best suited to improve their own situation, public sector union members overwhelmingly say the NDP, traditionally associated with organized labour, is the best option (49% say this, a 31-point advantage over the next option chosen). That said, those in private sector unions are less certain. One-third say the Conservative Party would be best (32%), one-third choose the NDP (32%) and 26 per cent choose the governing Liberal Party.

More Key Findings:

- Overall, 35 per cent of Canadians say the power of organized labour has increased over the past decade or so. One-quarter (25%) say it has decreased. Current union members are divided, with three-in-ten saying union power has increased (28%) and decreased (31%).
- Male union members (62%) are more likely than female ones (49%) to believe union membership brings more benefits than costs.
- Canadians who say unions are too powerful outnumber those who say they are too weak by a two-to-one ratio (39% to 20%). Across federal party support from the 2021 election, only past NDP voters are more likely to say the opposite.
- In most of the country the right to strike (47%) outweighs the risk of negative economic consequences (37%) resulting from that action. Only in Saskatchewan is this proportion reversed.

About ARI

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

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Part One: Union members’ own experiences

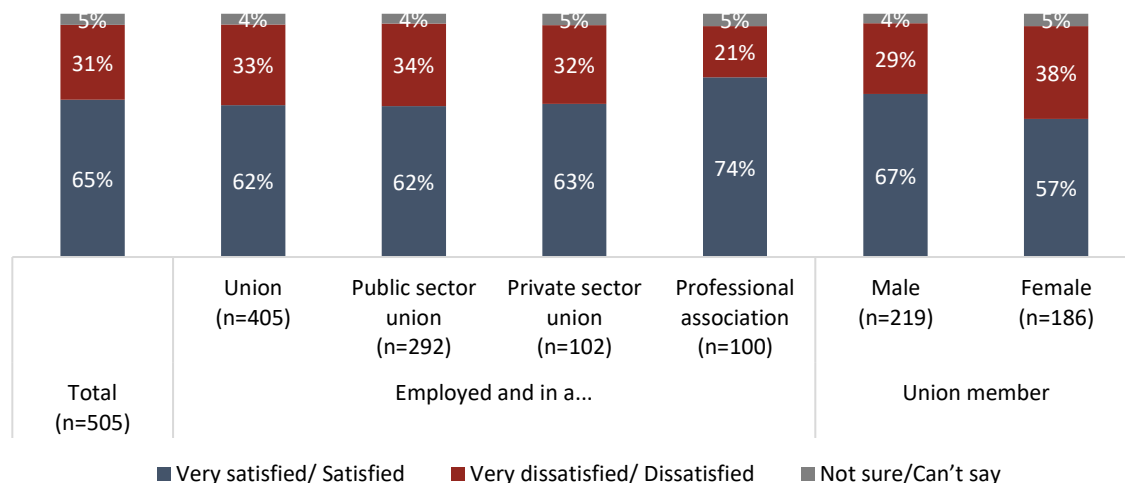
Recent years have seen a significant amount of labour strife in Canada. As the country exited COVID-19 restrictions, high inflation not seen in decades pressured Canadians’ finances, causing many unions to set a hardline when it came to the negotiating table. There have been 481 work stoppages across the country since 2021, resulting in more than 5.1 million lost workdays [according to Statistics Canada](#). The latter represents the most lost workdays in a three-year period since 2003-05.

With all of this as a backdrop, the experiences and satisfaction levels of Canadian union members becomes paramount in the public discourse.

Two-thirds satisfied with representation; three-in-ten dissatisfied

The Angus Reid Institute asked Canadian union members about their own experiences, finding that overall, two-thirds are satisfied that their own union or professional association has done a good job in representing their interests. Notably, three-in-ten (31%) disagree, rising to 38 per cent among women who are union members. Those in professional associations tend to be more satisfied than those in unions, though both groups lean toward offering praise:

How satisfied are you with the job that your union/professional association does in representing your interests? (Among current union/PA members)



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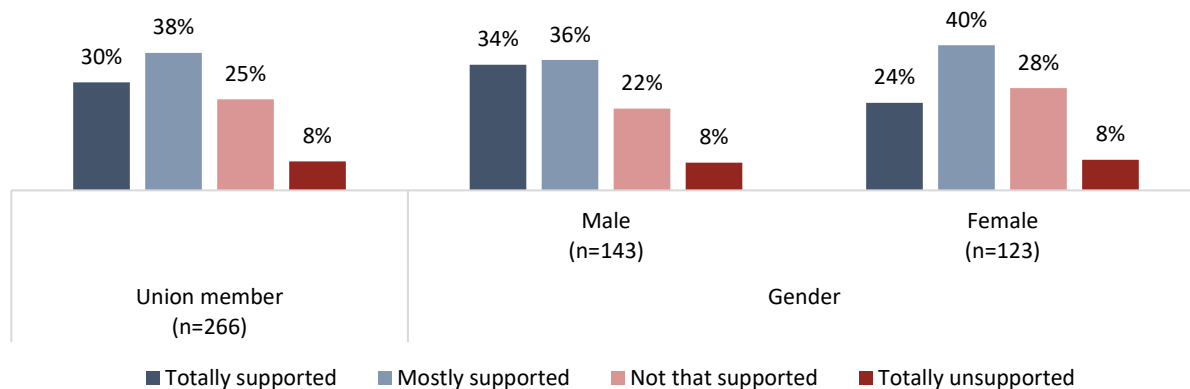
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One-third felt unsupported when they sought help

Many current union members have sought assistance from a union representative for a work-related issue. One-in-five (22%) have done this more than once while two-in-five (39%) say they have done this once or twice. These issues are more common among union members than those in professional associations ([see detailed tables](#)).

Experiences with resolution among union members are varied, but generally positive. Among those who spoke to a representative, three-in-ten (30%) say they felt totally supported during this process. Another two-in-five (38%) say they felt mostly supported, while one-in-three (33%) say their representative made them feel unsupported. Women are more likely to say that they did not feel they received adequate support (36%) than men (30%).

**And how supported did you feel during this process?
(Among those who have gone to a union representative for assistance with a work-related issue)**



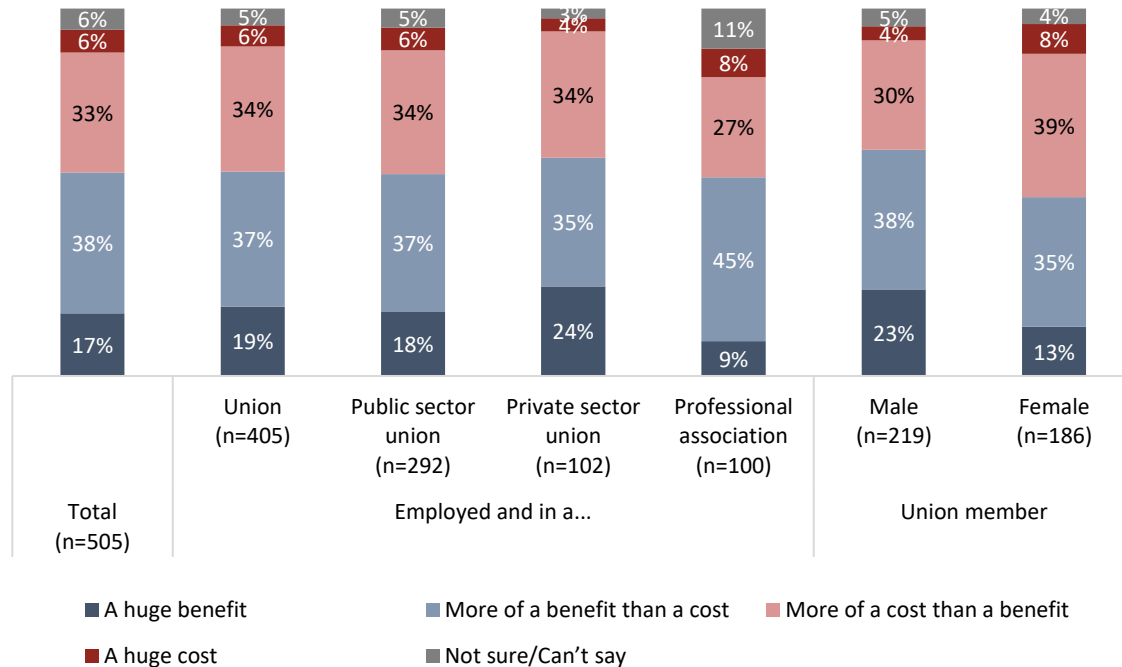
Majority say membership more benefit than cost, but two-in-five disagree

Union membership comes at a cost, which is often weighed against the benefits that collective action can deliver. Overall, approximately one-in-five union members say they receive a huge benefit in return for what they pay, while closer to two-in-five (38%) say this is more of a benefit than a cost. On the other side of the equation, two-in-five (39%) say they do not think they receive enough benefit to cancel out what they pay. Public and private sector members are equally likely to say this, though women are more likely than men to say they do not receive enough benefit (47% vs 34%).

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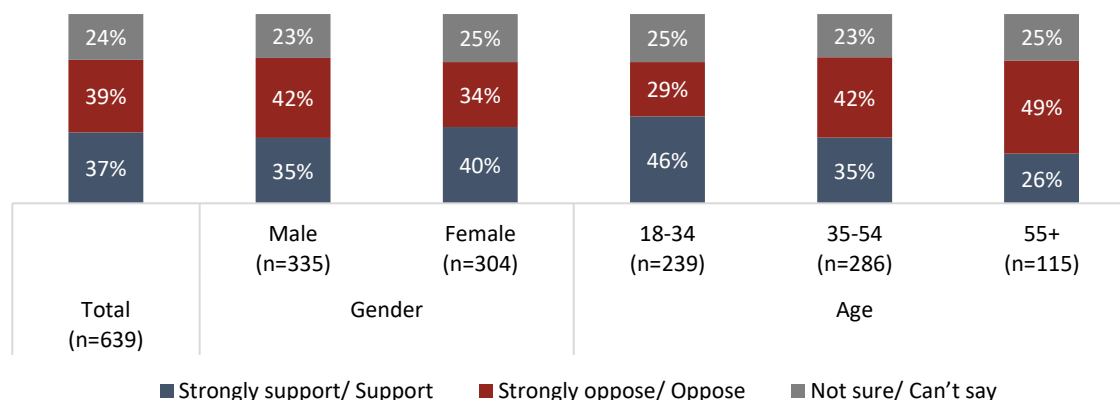
**And overall, given the costs and benefits of union membership, how much of a benefit has this been for you personally?
(Among current union/PA members)**



Non-union members equally likely to support/oppose organizing at their own workplace

To round out perception of unions and the benefits they provide, those who are not in a union but are currently working were asked if they would like their own workplace to organize. On this, workers are divided. Two-in-five would support this (37%) while nearly the same number (39%) would oppose it. Young people are far more likely to welcome unionizing:

Suppose you were approached about an organizing effort at your own place of work, is this something you would support or oppose?
(Among those employed but not currently in a union)



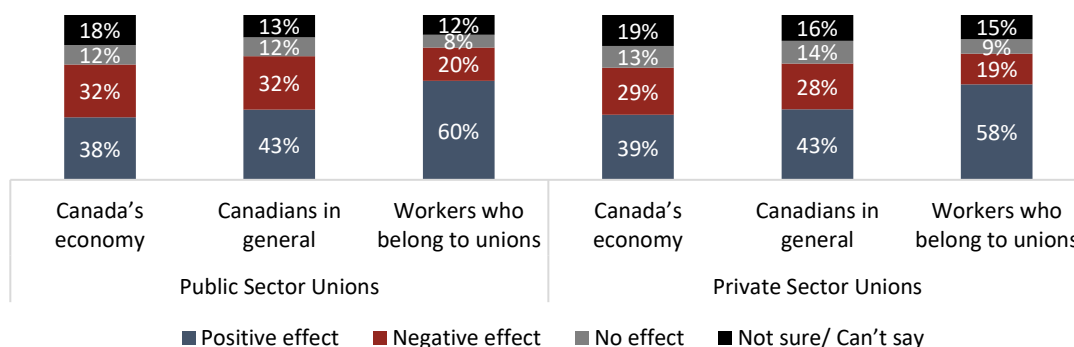
Part Two: Impact of unions in Canada

This year alone has seen [155,000 federal employees walk off the job](#), one of the [largest strikes in Canada's history](#); a [port workers strike which shut down Canada's busiest port](#); and an [averted strike of WestJet pilots](#); among other strikes effecting smaller employers. And there remains the [looming threat](#) of potential job action at Stellantis, Ford and GM in Ontario's rust belt.

Canadians say workers benefit, divided about economic impact

Canadians were asked to assess the impact of private and public sector unions on the country, its people and union workers. Majorities believe both public and private sector unions have a positive impact on the unionized workers. There is more division when it comes to the effect of unions on Canada's economy and Canadians in general:

Do you believe unions have had a positive, negative or no effect on the following?
(All respondents, n=2,023)



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B.C., Atlantic Canada most bullish on union benefits

Union coverage varies across the country, with Newfoundland and Labrador (39.7% of employed Canadians) and Quebec (37.3%) most saturated, while Alberta (21.4%) and Ontario (24.7%) lag, [according to Statistics Canada](#). This is worth noting as those in Atlantic Canada are the most positive in their views towards both public and private sector unions while Albertans are decidedly more mixed. Those in B.C. also offer high assessments, while those in Saskatchewan join their neighbours in Alberta in offering more criticism:

Do you believe unions have had a positive, negative or no effect on the following? (Net positive effect shown)									
		Total (n=2,023)	Region						
			BC (n=305)	AB (n=246)	SK (n=150)	MB (n=150)	ON (n=580)	QC (n=444)	ATL (n=148)
Public Sector Unions	Canada's economy	+6	+12	+1	-3	+4	+7	+1	+20
	Canadians in general	+10	+22	0	+3	+5	+9	+7	+25
	Workers who belong to unions	+40	+46	+36	+26	+37	+40	+38	+50
Private Sector Unions	Canada's economy	+11	+13	+2	-8	+17	+13	+7	+29
	Canadians in general	+15	+17	+6	-9	+21	+18	+13	+25
	Workers who belong to unions	+39	+40	+27	+20	+43	+41	+39	+54

Men older than 54 are the most negative demographic in their assessment in both public and private sector unions, though they are more likely to offer praise to private sector unions than public sector ones. Women aged 18 to 34, meanwhile, offer unions glowing assessments of their impacts:

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Do you believe unions have had a positive, negative or no effect on the following? (Net positive effect shown)								
		Total (n=2,023)	Male			Female		
			18-34 (n=270)	35-54 (n=319)	55+ (n=392)	18-34 (n=266)	35-54 (n=331)	55+ (n=440)
Public Sector Unions	Canada's economy	+6	+14	+4	-14	+19	+13	+8
	Canadians in general	+10	+10	+10	-10	+32	+18	+10
	Workers who belong to unions	+40	+45	+38	+38	+42	+43	+37
Private Sector Unions	Canada's economy	+11	+15	+18	-2	+22	+12	+7
	Canadians in general	+15	+18	+20	-2	+31	+18	+13
	Workers who belong to unions	+39	+41	+42	+37	+43	+42	+35

Union members see positive value for all in organized representation

The sense among union members is that unions are a net benefit to the economy, Canadians in general and themselves. However, public sector union members are less effusive in their praise for private sector unions and vice versa:

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Do you believe unions have had a positive, negative or no effect on the following? (Net positive effect shown)							
		Total (n=2,023)	Employed and in a...				
			Union (n=405)	Public sector union (n=292)	Private sector union (n=102)	Professional association (n=100)	Neither union/PA (n=706)
Public Sector Unions	Canada's economy	+6	+37	+44	+22	+15	-9
	Canadians in general	+10	+39	+47	+18	+21	-2
	Workers who belong to unions	+40	+58	+60	+57	+54	+30
Private Sector Unions	Canada's economy	+11	+38	+34	+49	+16	-1
	Canadians in general	+15	+39	+38	+41	+22	+6
	Workers who belong to unions	+39	+58	+58	+58	+48	+31

Are unions too powerful, or too weak? It depends on politics

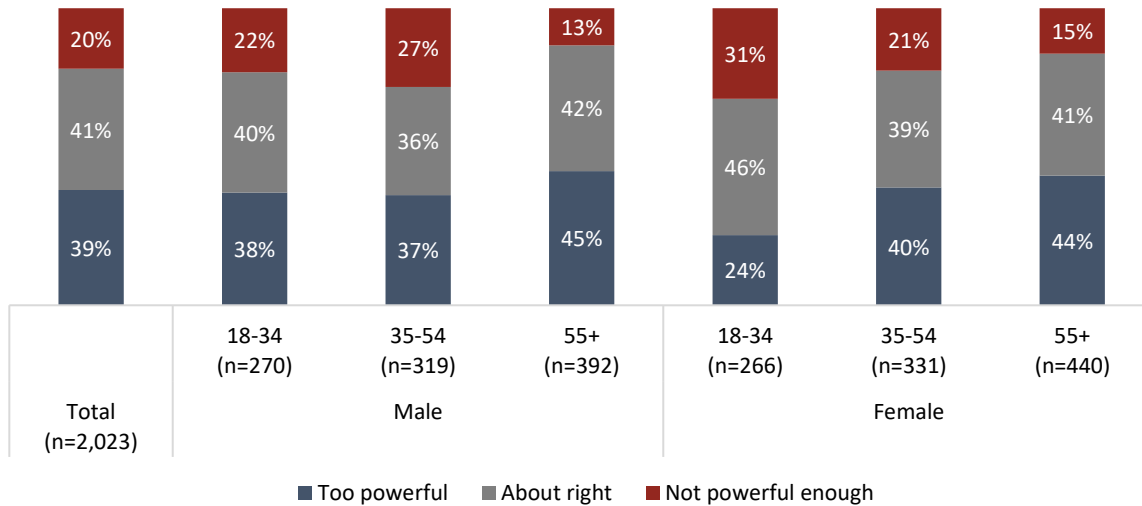
A near equal number of Canadians believe unions hold too much sway (39%) as the right amount of power in the country (41%). A minority of one-in-five (20%) instead view unions as not as powerful as they should be.

Canadians older than 54 are most likely to see unions as too powerful, while women aged 18 to 34 (31%) and men 35 to 54 (27%) are the most likely to believe unions should be more powerful than they are:

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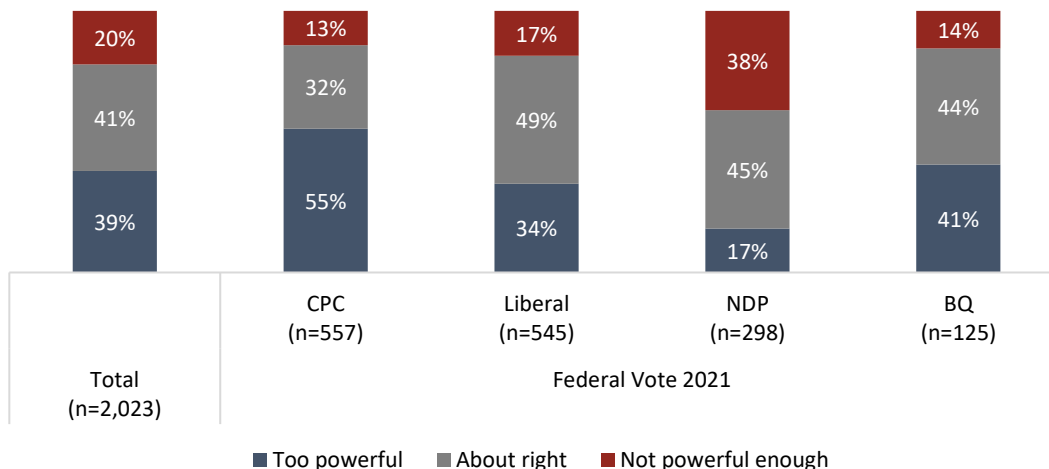
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Would you say that labour unions in Canada are too powerful, not powerful enough, or about right?



Assessments of union power vary across party lines. A majority of those who voted Conservative in the 2021 federal election (55%) view unions as too powerful. Fewer than one-in-five (17%) of past NDP voters agree, instead two-in-five (38%) among that group believe unions are not powerful enough. Past Liberal voters lie between those two ends of the spectrum; half (49%) among those partisans say Canada is in the Goldilocks zone of union power:

Would you say that labour unions in Canada are too powerful, not powerful enough, or about right?

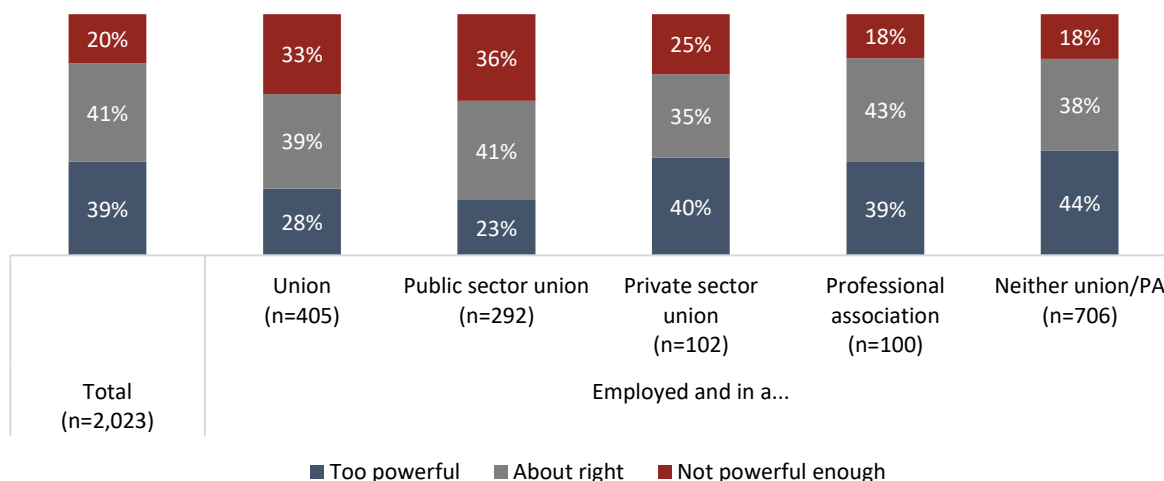


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One-third of union members (33%) say unions aren't powerful enough. However, even among card-carriers, this is a minority opinion. Meanwhile, private sector union members (40%) are nearly twice as likely as public sector ones (23%) to believe unions are currently too powerful:

Would you say that labour unions in Canada are too powerful, not powerful enough, or about right?



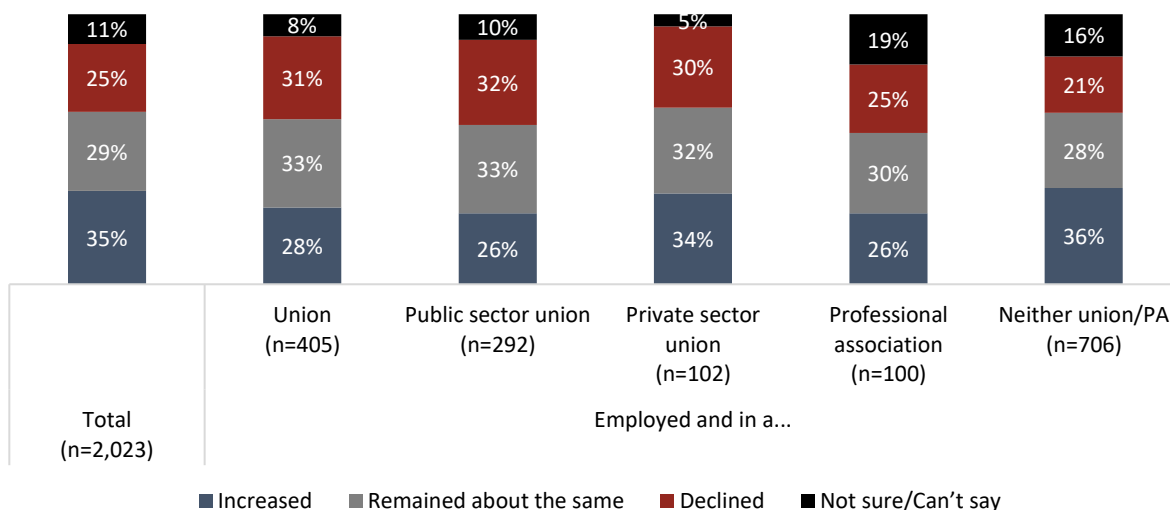
As of 2022, 29 per cent of Canadians were in a union, [a decline](#) from the level of 38 per cent seen in 1981. However, the rate of unionization is stable when compared to [a decade ago](#).

Canadians are split as to whether the influence of unions has grown, shrank or stagnated in the past decade. The largest group – one-third (35%) – believe unions have gained influence in the past 10 years, while 25 per cent believe the opposite. Current union members are more likely than those who aren't in one to believe unions are less influential than they were a decade ago, but are also divided on the matter:

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Thinking of the past ten years or so, do you think the influence of labour unions in Canada has increased, declined, or remained about the same?



Which federal party is best for organized labour?

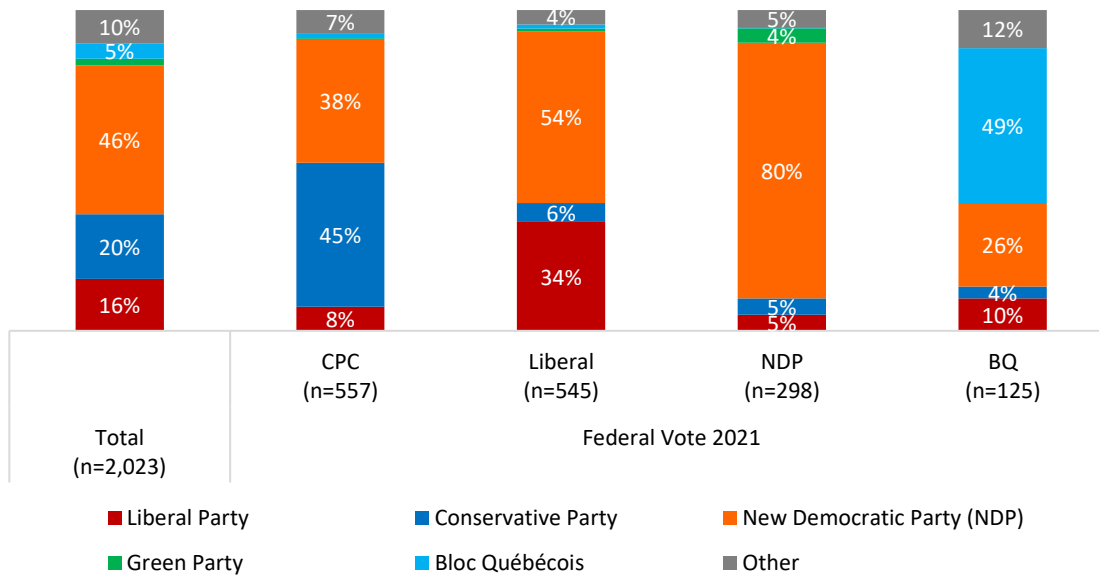
The New Democratic Party has [historically been viewed](#) as the party of unions. The Canadian Union of Public Employees, Canada's largest union, [endorsed the NDP and leader Jagmeet Singh](#) in the 2021 election.

The NDP are viewed by a plurality (46%) of Canadians as the best party to represent the interests of labour unions. Past Liberal voters are more likely to believe the NDP is the best choice on this front (54%) than their own party (34%). Those who voted Conservative in 2021 narrowly give the edge to their own party (45%), but still two-in-five (38%) say the NDP is the better choice for the interests of labour unions:

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Thinking about the federal government, which of the following parties do you feel would best represent the interests of labour unions if they were in power?



However, [earlier research from the Angus Reid Institute](#) noted the shifting allegiances of union members, who were nearly as likely to have voted CPC as NDP in the past federal election.

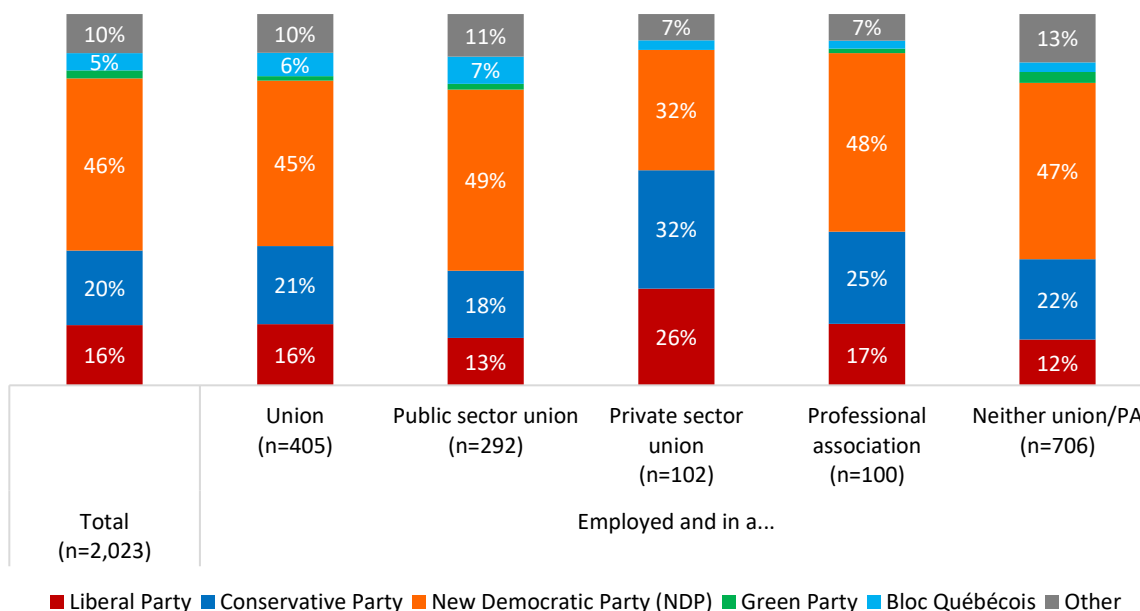
Related: [The changing politics of unions](#)

This view is perhaps best illustrated by the views of private sector union members, who are as likely to believe the CPC would best represent their interests (32%) as the NDP (32%). Half (49%) of those in public sector unions select the NDP on this front. Private sector union members are also twice as likely to believe the Liberals (26%) are the best choice for unions as public sector members (13%), but the party of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is the minority choice in both cases:

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Thinking about the federal government, which of the following parties do you feel would best represent the interests of labour unions if they were in power?



Part Three: On the costs and benefits of collective strike action

After the port workers strike in B.C. in July, experts believed it could take months before the supply chain backlog would be cleared. When the strike ended, there were 63,000 shipping containers waiting to be unloaded from vessels in B.C. ports. One UBC economics professor estimated the total cost of the 13-day port strike to be \$100 million, while the Canadian Manufacturers & Exporters estimated about \$500 million of trade was disrupted each day of the strike.

Right to bargain outweighs risk of economic damage in most of Canada

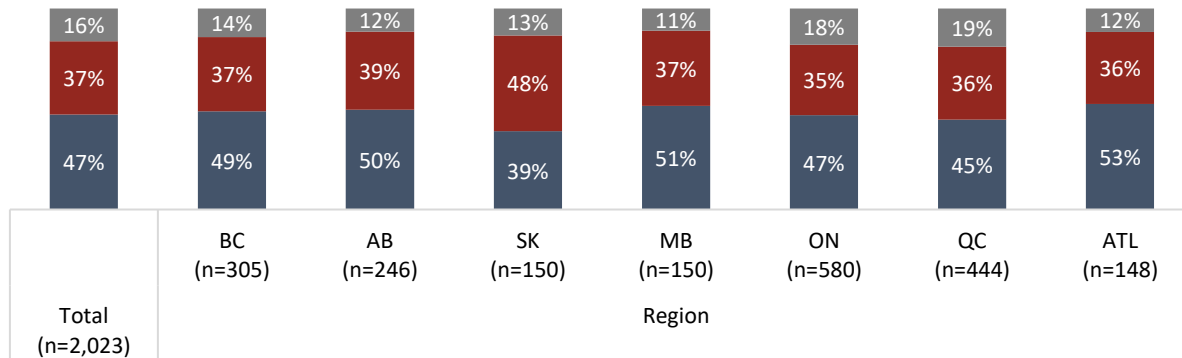
Still, when it comes to these potentially high impact strikes, Canadians lean towards prioritizing workers' right to bargain. Approaching half (47%) say the right to negotiate for better work conditions is a more important consideration than any economic risk. Approaching two-in-five (37%) Canadians believe the opposite, that the potential negative economic impacts are the more important consideration.

In all regions except Saskatchewan, Canadians are more likely to prioritize the right to bargain over the risk of economic damage:

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Which of these statements is closest to your view?



■ Not sure/Can't say

■ The risk of negative economic impacts of the strike is more important to consider than the unions' right to bargain for better work conditions

■ The right to bargain for better work conditions is more important than the risk of damage to Canada's economy

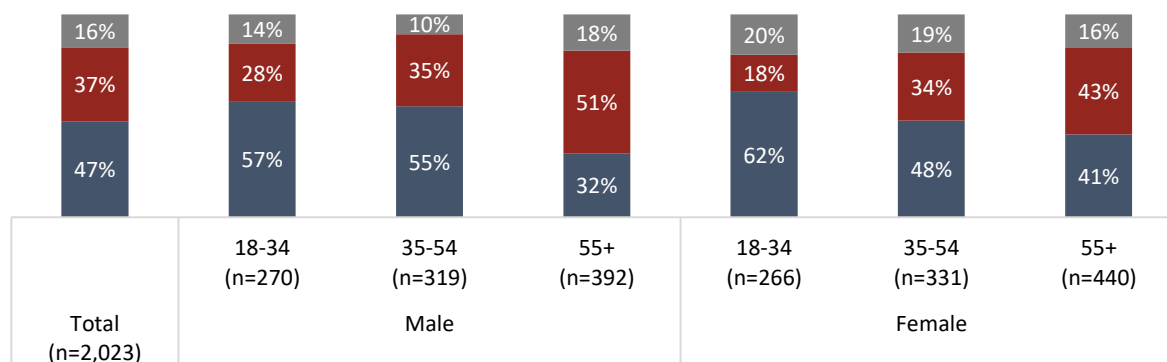
Generational divergence

Majorities of men younger than 55 and women aged 18 to 34 believe workers' right to negotiate is the more important consideration. They are joined by half (48%) of 35- to 54-year-old women. Canadians aged 55 and older lean towards believing potential negative impacts are the more important consideration, though men that age lean further towards concern over the economy than women:

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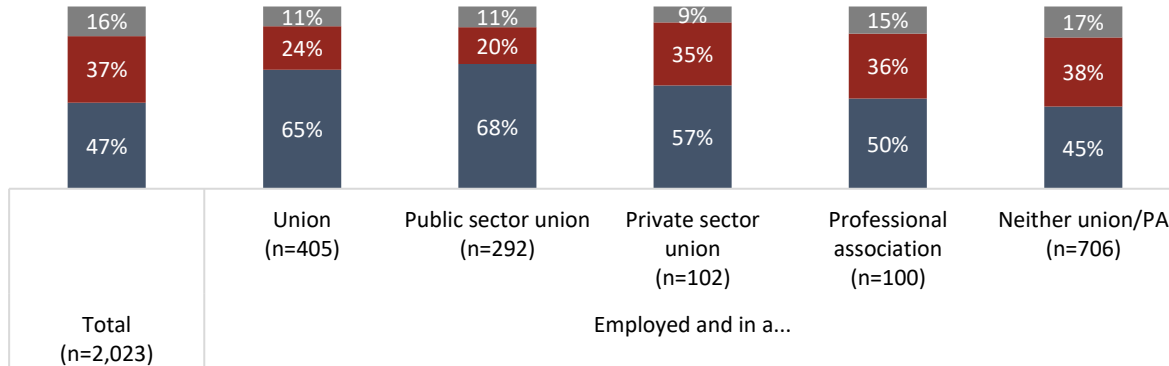
Non-union members lean towards workers' rights over economic risks

Majorities of union members believe workers' rights supersede any potential negative impacts. Those who are neither in a union nor a professional association are more equivocal on the matter, but are more likely to feel the economic risks are outweighed by the right for workers to bargain for a better deal:

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For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, [click here](#).

For detailed results by union membership, [click here](#).

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