

Labor Unions- Part 5: North Carolina Organized Labor: The Modern Era ^[1]

Labor Unions

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See also: [Child Labor](#) ^[2]; [Flying Squadrons](#) ^[3]; [Gastonia Strike](#) ^[4]; [Harriet-Henderson Cotton Mills Strike](#) ^[5]; [Right-to-Work Law](#) ^[6].

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Part 5: North Carolina Organized Labor: The Modern Era

Although the ACTWU eventually won a contract and preserved its right to bargain for the [Roanoke Rapids](#) ^[11] workers, this hard-fought victory did not translate into greater influence at other plants in North Carolina. In 1985 workers at the [Cannon mills](#) ^[12] overwhelmingly refused to support union representation, and two subsequent elections in 1991 and 1997 were thrown out by the [National Labor Relations Board](#) ^[13]. In 1999, however, the [Union of Needletrades, Industrial, and Textile Employees](#) ^[14], a successor to the ACTWU, won a narrow election held at the Fieldcrest Cannon mills in Kannapolis. Labor experts cited the uncertainty caused by shifts in ownership, the increased demands of modern production, and the growing number of immigrants in the workforce who tended to support unions as reasons for the stunning union victory. Nevertheless, some experts have deemed the Kannapolis election the most important labor victory in the South's history.

While organized labor made some headway in the second half of the twentieth century, a major setback was the failure of the national unions and the State Federation of Labor to prevent North Carolina from becoming a [right-to-work](#) ^[6] state in 1947. Since the 1970s, a decline in employment and union membership in manufacturing industries has been partially offset by union growth among public employees (including police and fire personnel) and service employees. By the early twenty-first century, organizing activities increasingly focused on the state's agricultural and food-processing workers. A 1995 strike and union election by largely Guatemalan poultry processors at [Morganton's Case Farms](#) ^[15] was one such effort that garnered regional and national attention. While workers voted to affiliate with the Laborers International Union of North America, Case Farms management refused to negotiate with the union, sparking labor strife that lasted through the end of the 1990s.

In the early 2000s, North Carolina remained among the least-unionized states in the nation. Total union membership at times has been estimated to be no more than 8 percent of the state's nonagricultural workforce, although the [U.S. Department of Labor](#) ^[16] reported North Carolina union membership at only about 3.2 percent in the early twenty-first century.

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Additional Resources:

National Labor Relations Board: <http://www.nlrb.gov/> ^[13]

U.S. Department of Labor: <http://www.dol.gov/> [16]

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