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R.I. ranks fifth for states with strongest unions

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Editor's note: The following article was written for SmartAsset and posted on the Yahoo Finance and Rhode Island AFL-CIO ENews websites.

Unions can be effective tools for collective bargaining. They represent workers in negotiations with management to uphold workers' rights, including fair wages. According to a 2018 report on full-time workers from the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), nonunion workers earned just 82 percent of the median weekly amount that union member workers earned.

Being able to make a fair wage is necessary in order to budget properly and build up your saving account. But the power of unions in the U.S. varies significantly across different locations. Some states are union hotbeds, where organized labor is a major player in business and politics. In other states, unions don't hold as much sway. SmartAsset decided to see where unions are the strongest.

To find the states with the strongest unions, we analyzed data across the following eight metrics: number of union members, the percentage of workers who are union members, five-year change in union membership,

average annual wage for all occupations, average annual wage for middle school teachers, the salary ratio of teachers to all occupations, the average wage for firefighters and the salary ratio of firefighters to all occupations.

We looked specifically at teachers and firefighters, because according to the BLS, the highest unionization rates among occupational groups in 2018 were in protective service occupations (33.9 percent) and in education, training and library occupations (33.8 percent). Firefighters and middle school teachers are prominent occupations within both of those industries and workers in those jobs tend to make salaries toward the middle of the ranges for all occupations within those industries. Key findings were:

Unions are stronger on the coasts. The East Coast populates the top 10, with six states located in the Northeast. The other four states in the top 10 are either on the West Coast or in the Pacific. No states from the interior of the country are in the top 10.

Unions are weaker in the South. Eight of the bottom 10 states in our study are in the South. Many of them do particularly poorly in terms of number of union members and percentage of workers belonging to a union.

The top 10 list is:

Washington – The state doesn't lead any single metric but places in the top five for several. Washington has the third highest percentage of workers being union members, 19.80 percent, and the fifth highest number of union members overall, more than 658,000. Washington also has the fourth highest annual wage for all occupations, \$59,410.

New York – The state has the second-highest number of total union members, at more than 1.8 million. It also has the second-highest percentage of workers belonging to unions, 22.29 percent, and the second-highest annual wage for all occupations, \$61,870. Middle school teachers in the state make \$83,490 on average -- the highest amount for this metric in the study.

California – The state ranks third overall and it has the highest number of union members of any state, at more than 2.4 million. The percentage of workers in unions in California is just 14.67 percent, which ranks a bit lower than some other states in the top 10 but still comes in ninth overall. Union membership in California has gone down 2.59 percent in the past five years. Firefighters in California earn \$81,580 on average, the highest amount in the study. That is 137.92 percent of the average for all occupations, the second-highest ratio for this metric in the study.

Connecticut -- The average annual wage across all occupations in Connecticut is \$60,780, the third-highest in the study. Firefighters earn \$63,630 on average, the seventh-highest average in the study. That's 104.69 percent of the average across all occupations, a top-20 rate. Connecticut comes in sixth overall in terms of the percentage of workers in unions at 15.93 percent.

Rhode Island -- In the Ocean State, middle school teachers earn an average of \$72,180, the eighth-highest average in the study. That total is 131.69 percent of the average income across other professions, the fourth-highest ratio in the study for this metric. Around 17.34 percent of workers are part of a union, a top-five rate.

Massachusetts – The Bay State leads the study in terms of average salary across all occupations at \$63,910. It ranks second for middle school teacher pay at \$79,030. There are more than 462,000 members of unions in Massachusetts, the 11th-highest amount for this metric in the study. Be sure to manage your tax liabilities properly here as you grow your wealth as Massachusetts is the No. 4 state where it costs the most to be rich.

New Jersey -- Firefighters in New Jersey earn \$76,530 on average, the second-highest amount for this metric in the study. That income is 131.47 percent of the average wages across all occupations in the state, the third-highest ratio for this metric overall. New Jersey ranks within the top 10 for its total number of union members at more than 587,000 and for the percentage of workers there who belong to unions at 14.93 percent.

Hawaii (tie) – The state ranks first in the study for the number of union workers as a percentage of all workers at 23.10 percent. It also ranks in the top 10 for both of the metrics related to firefighters. The average firefighter salary in Hawaii is \$62,670, which is 118.47 percent of the average salary for all occupations in the state. Additionally, the state ranks 27th for its total number of union workers, which reaches more than 138,000.

Oregon (tie) – The state has the sixth-highest average salary for teachers in this study at \$75,280. That is 144.77 percent of the average salary in all occupations in the state, the highest ratio in this study. There are more than 241,000 unionized workers in the state, and they represent around 13.85 percent of all workers in the state.

Pennsylvania – The Keystone State rounds out our list of the top 10 states with the strongest unions. Teachers make 135.82 percent of the average salary for all workers in the state, the second-highest ratio in the study. Although union membership has decreased slightly in Pennsylvania in the five-year period from 2014 through 2018, the state still has the fourth-highest total number of union workers in the study at more than 700,000. Furthermore, approximately 12.54 percent of all workers belong to a union. And if you don't want to work a union job into your elder years, note that Pennsylvania is one of the best states to retire early.