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JANUARY 2025

# UNION-CURIIOUS YOUNG WORKERS IN SANTA CRUZ COUNTY

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When workers unionize, they are more likely to secure higher wages, safer working conditions, and better health and retirement benefits.<sup>1</sup> While younger people tend to be more supportive of unions than their elders, many youth are best described as union-curious—meaning they are unsure about whether they would join a union if presented with the choice.<sup>2</sup> Union-curious individuals do not necessarily hold negative views about unions, and with more information may be willing to unionize. In this research brief, we summarize young workers' interest in union membership, revealing that youth in diverse industries across Santa Cruz County are by and large either supportive of unions or union-curious. Our findings highlight strategies for mounting successful unionization drives and the importance of public education on how unions function. This research has the potential to be impactful because unions not only enhance workers' well-being but also benefit the broader Santa Cruz community.

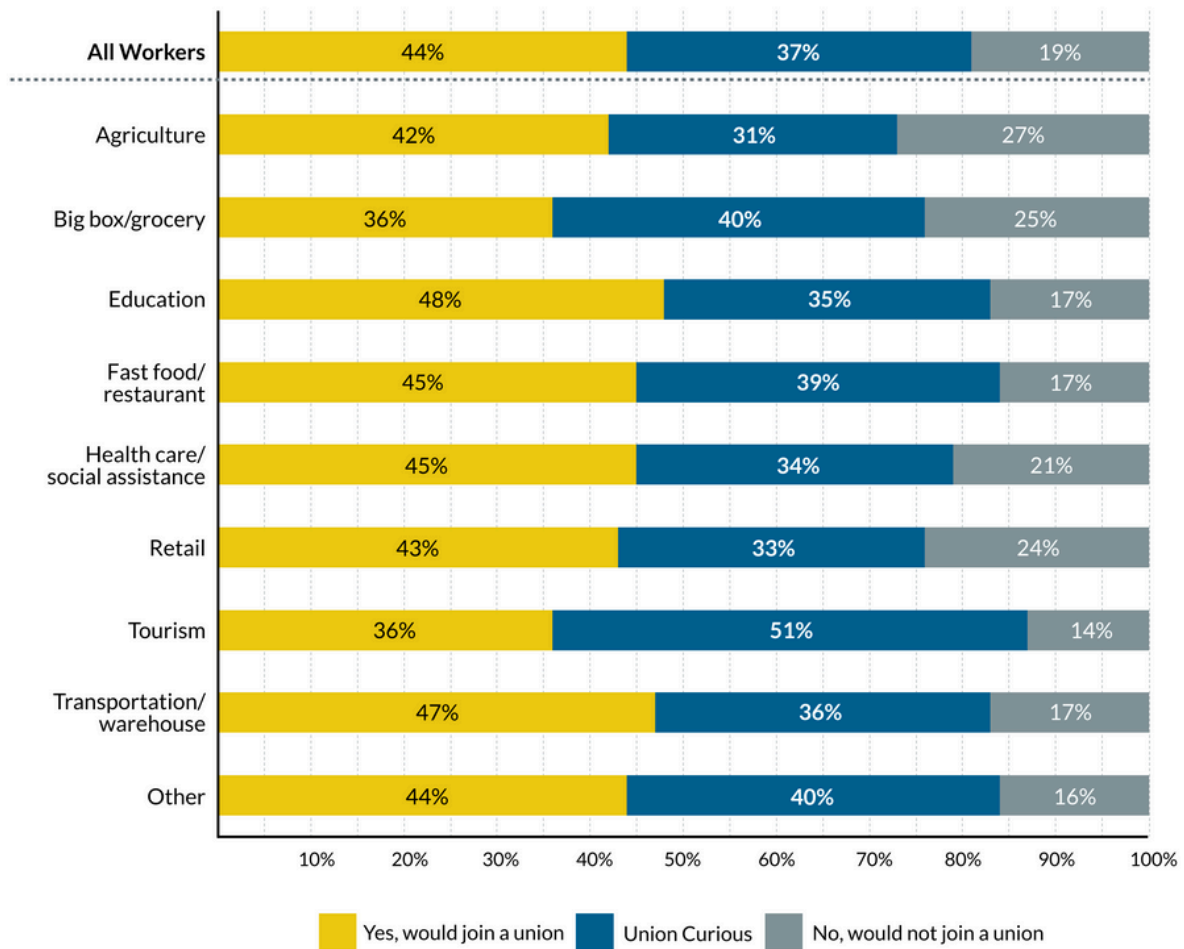
Given its recent success stories, Santa Cruz stands out nationally for its young-worker organizing potential. One of the first unionized Starbucks in California is in Santa Cruz, and workers at the county's REI location successfully formed a union as well. Our 2024 survey of 18-34-year-old Santa Cruz County residents demonstrates the potential to unionize even more workers.<sup>3</sup> Among those not already unionized, the largest share (44%) of workers indicated that they would join a union if given the opportunity. Meanwhile, 37% could be considered union-curious, reporting that they did not know whether they would join a union. Only 19% said they would not join a union. We found modest variation in union interest across sectors. Education (48%) and transportation (47%) workers expressed the most interest in joining a union, while the most union-curious workers by far worked in tourism (51%). Those opposed to joining a union remain a minority across all industries.

<sup>1</sup> Brown, H. (2022, September 1). "The union advantage for young workers: Higher wages and more benefits." Center for Economic Policy and Research. <https://cepr.net/the-union-advantage-for-young-workers-higher-wages-and-more-benefits/>

<sup>2</sup> Alquist, J. S., Grumach, J., & Kochan, T. (2024, July 16). "The rise of the union-curious: Support for unionization among America's frontline workers." Economic Policy Institute. <https://www.epi.org/publication/rise-of-the-union-curious/>

<sup>3</sup> In spring 2024, UC Santa Cruz and Cabrillo students collected surveys from Santa Cruz County workers, students, and residents. The survey sample included 1,947 young adults aged 18-34 who were not part of a union. We adjusted the survey sample to be reflective of the school enrollment rates, age, race, and gender of young adult residents across Santa Cruz County. The chart shows the responses to the question: "If you could freely join a union or workers' association without fear of retaliation, such as being fired or deported, would you want to?"

## Interest in Joining a Union Santa Cruz County Workers Aged 18-34, by Industry



Source: Santa Cruz Thriving Youth Study  
 Note: This analysis is restricted to young adults who are not yet part of the union (n=1947)

This research highlights the significant potential to organize young workers in Santa Cruz County. Given our findings, we believe that Santa Cruz’s educators, unions, and economic justice advocates can improve local unionization rates by increasing public awareness of unions. By explaining how to form a union, what unions do, how they operate, and the benefits they bring to workers and their communities, these stakeholders can facilitate successful unionization drives. Unionizing local workplaces not only improves the living conditions for individual workers but also strengthens the local economy by increasing their purchasing power and economic resilience. Additionally, higher unionization rates can contribute to an expanded local tax base, enabling greater investment in public services and enhancing the overall quality of life for all Santa Cruz residents.

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