



# Workers at an employee-owned Utah grocery vote to unionize, citing ‘unsustainable’ conditions

Workers at South Salt Lake’s WinCo Foods say their joining the Teamsters will be good for shoppers, too.



(Chris Samuels | The Salt Lake Tribune) WinCo employees Chazio Rizzo, Elliot Goble and Matty Jackson pose for a photograph in South Salt Lake, Monday, Feb. 12, 2024. The three employees have helped form WinCo's first unionized retail employees.

By Shannon Sollitt and Megan Banta | Feb. 12, 2024, 12:49 p.m. | Updated: Feb. 13, 2024, 2:11 p.m.

Comment

A sign in front of WinCo Foods in South Salt Lake boasts that the warehouse-style supermarket is “employee-owned.”

Employees say the reality is more complicated. So they voted last week to unionize.

“I feel like I’m on top of the world,” said employee Elliot Goble just after the election, in which a majority of eligible employees opted to join the local Teamsters union. “This is one of our greatest achievements.”

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A spokesperson for WinCo said the company is “disappointed” in the election results.

“The company believes in treating employees fairly and offering a competitive pay and benefits package, which can be accomplished without the need for employees to pay union dues,” said Noah Fleisher, director of corporate communications. Fleisher said the company already has an Employee Association Committee, “which gives our employees a voice to collectively negotiate and work together with management to share any concerns or issues they may have as a valued member of our company.”

-69%

Puffy Mattress | Memory Foam Mattress | Puffy Mattress in a Box | Mattress for Back Pain | Twin Si

\$599

Repr

The WinCo vote, reported to the National Labor Relations Board last week and announced Monday, comes as support for unions has been rising in recent years, [according to a Gallup poll](#). Membership in unions, however, remains low nationally — with 10.1% of working Americans belonging to a union — and Utah has one of the lowest union membership rates in the nation, at about 4%.

Goble said he and his fellow employees hope the Teamsters can negotiate a contract that makes working at WinCo more sustainable — and shopping at WinCo more enjoyable. Shoppers and employees alike are drawn to the store for its proclaimed business ethics, Goble said, but those perks are not equitably available.

“It’s been a really, really tough work environment for a really long time,” Goble said.

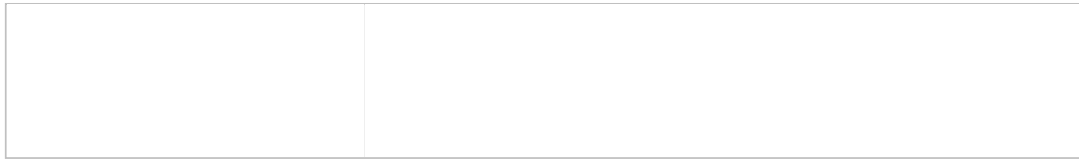
The tough work environment means most employees don’t actually own stock in the company, Goble said, because they don’t stick around long enough to be vested. Employees, he said, are pushed out by low wages, or inconsistent hours, or an absence policy that unduly punishes new people for calling in sick.

The South Salt Lake location, at 2193 S. Main, is one of nine WinCo locations in Utah, spanning the I-15 corridor from Logan to Orem. The company, based in Boise, Idaho, has stores in 10 states, all west of the Mississippi.



(Chris Samuels | The Salt Lake Tribune) The WinCo storefront in South Salt Lake, Monday, Feb. 12, 2024.

## Shoppers and employees speak



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Shoppers, too, have noticed the Salt Lake store’s staffing woes. Reddit users celebrated the union announcement in [a post last week](#), even while some noted how understaffed the store seems.

“I’m happy for them, unions are the only way employees can negotiate on even ground with their employers,” one user commented. “But ... I am shocked that store employs 100 people because there are never more than 3 checkout stands open at a time.”

“I spend as long in line there as I do shopping,” another user commented.

Employees said they hope better working conditions, negotiated by their new Teamster union, can fix that. One of the union’s contract goals is more consistent hours, so that working hours are distributed more evenly among employees and hours are not being cut “ruthlessly,” said Matt “Matty” Jackson.

Partial ownership was what lured Jackson to the job a little over a year ago. He said he quickly understood what a lofty promise it was.

-69%	<b>Puffy Mattress   Mem...</b>	-40%	<b>Twin XL Puffy Monarch...</b>	-36%	<b>Twin XL Puffy Monarch...</b>	-25%	<b>Puf Bec</b>
	\$599		\$1,999		\$2,898		\$89

Repr

“If this company is going to fulfill its promise, working conditions need to be tolerable so that workers — the people who are presumed to own the store — actually get the opportunity,” Jackson said.

“Because it’s not as advertised.”

According to WinCo’s employee ownership policy, employees start earning stock in the company after they work at least 500 hours in their first six months, and keep earning stock for every year they work at least 1,000 hours. Earnings come in the form of annual contributions, worth 20% of an employee’s annual earnings, to an Employee Stock Ownership Plan (ESOP). Employees are 20% vested after two years, Fleisher said, and vesting increases annually. Employees gain full access to their account and its funds after six years.

The ownership program incentivizes hard work and longevity, WinCo says [on its website](#). But it also requires employees to last six years to be fully vested, or even one year to to start earning stock. Most of their colleagues at Salt Lake’s WinCo barely last six months, Goble and Jackson both said.

The result is a system in which a minority of employees, mostly managers, own stock and profit “based off of the work of people who never get their ownership stock,” Goble said.

### The data on unions in Utah

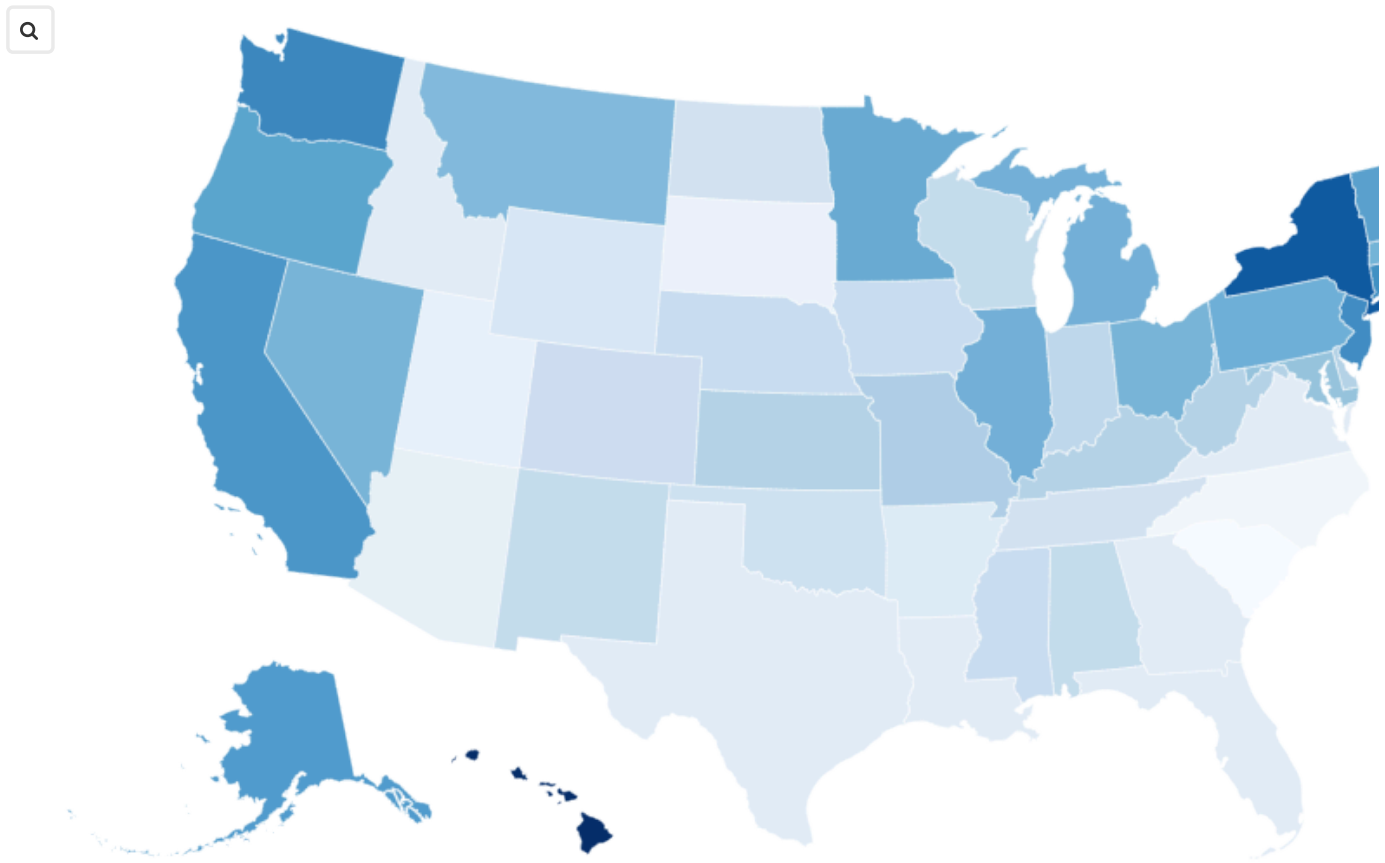
Unions are less common in Utah than in other states. About 4% of Utah workers age 16 and older are union members, according to data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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That’s 59.4% lower than the national rate of 10.1% and lower than all but three states — South Dakota, North Carolina and South Carolina. Two of Utah’s neighbors, Arizona and Idaho, also have low rates of unionization at 4.2% and 4.5%, respectively.

### Union membership by state

2.3% 24.1%



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Services, National Right to Work Foundation (Megan Banta | The Salt Lake Tribune)

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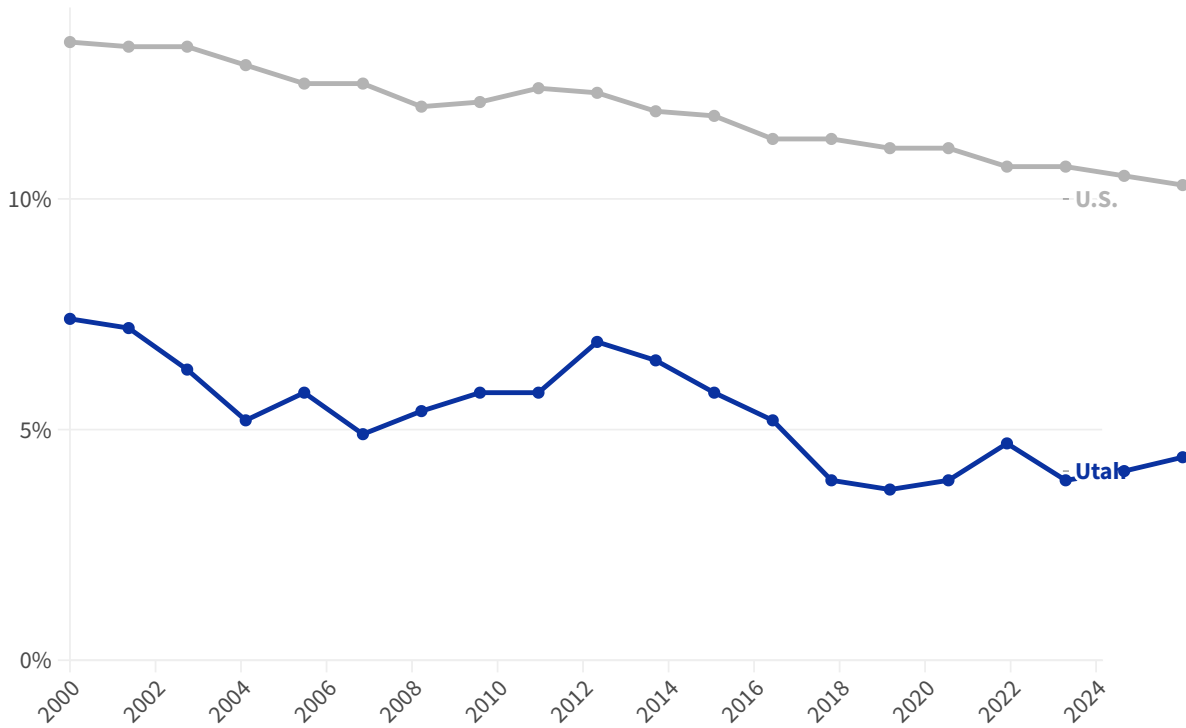
A Flourish map

While Utah has a low union membership rate, the number has been going up in recent years.

Between 2000 and 2023, union membership has variably dipped and grown. It has averaged about 5.1% in that time but hasn't been above 5% since 2012.

### Union membership over time

% of workers 16+ who are union members



Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics  
(Megan Banta | The Salt Lake Tribune)

The Salt Lake Tribune

A Flourish chart

Union membership hit a low of 3.5% in 2021 and rose slightly in both 2022 and last year.

Utah is a right-to-work state, meaning that workers can choose whether or not to join a union in their workplaces. Many of the states with low union membership and representation rates are right-to-work states.

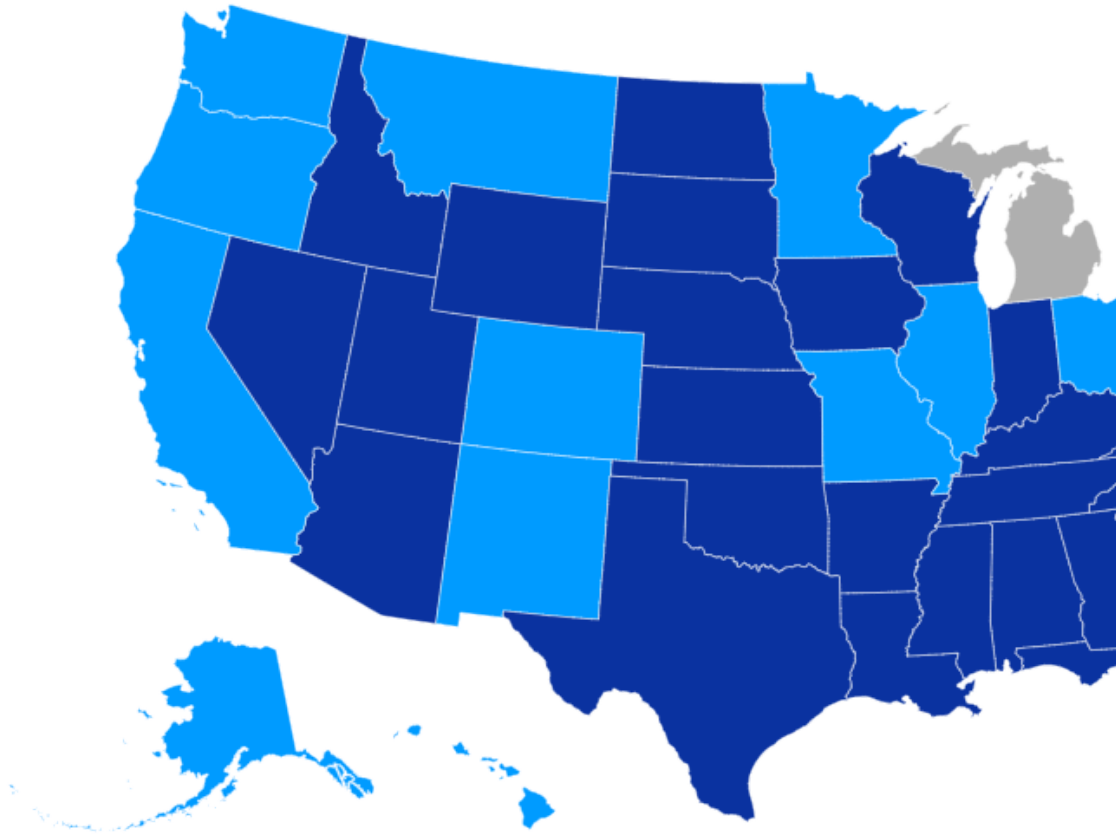
-25%	<b>Puffy Adjustable Bed...</b> \$1,199 <input type="button" value="Shop now"/>	-69%	<b>Puffy Mattress   Mem...</b> \$1,949	-40%	<b>Twin XL Puffy Monarch...</b> \$3,349	-51%	<b>Puf Ma \$2,</b>
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That means there is a difference in Utah and other states between someone who is a union member and someone represented by a union.

## Right to work states

Yes No Yes (but repeal effective Feb. 13, 2024)



Source: [U.S. Bureau of Labor Services](#), [National Right to Work Foundation](#)  
(Megan Banta | The Salt Lake Tribune)

**The Salt Lake Tribune**

A Flourish map

Union members pay dues, can vote in leadership elections and are represented by the union in contract negotiations and workplace disputes. But unions represent all employees whether or not they are members.

There are more Utah workers represented by unions than members, which the [Economic Policy Institute](#) argues is a more relevant statistic. About 8% of Utah workers age 16 and older were represented by unions in 2023, even though they were not voting members.

Though that percentage is higher, Utah is still low in union representation compared to other states. Utah tied with Wisconsin for the 16th lowest rate.

Nationally, public support for unions was at 67% in August 2023, according to [an annual Gallup poll](#). That's down from 71% the year before, but otherwise higher than that figure has been since 1967. High-profile strikes last year — by the United Auto Workers, and by Hollywood writers and actors — are often credited with the increased support.

\$244.99

\$699.99

\$204.99

\$64.99

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A bill moving through the Utah Legislature would add requirements for public unions and prohibit them from using public money or public property for union activities, including organizing and paying for union leave hours.

HB285, authored by State Rep. [Jordan Teuscher](#), R-South Jordan, passed to the House floor on an 8-4 vote in late January after a two-hour hearing where most public comment was against the bill.

The federal statistics on union membership do not differentiate between public-sector workers and private-sector employees.

### ‘We want to work here’

WinCo employees and Teamster organizer Josh Ikola worked “behind-the-scenes” for almost a year, Ikola said. In that time, employees came and went. Some of the union’s most ardent supporters left before they could cast their ballot.

“It took a lot of work to get this thing over the line,” Goble said.

-69%	Puffy Mattress   Memory Foam Mattress   Puffy Mattress in a B...	-40%	Twin XL Puffy Monarch Mattress - Twin XL - (38"W x 80"L x 16"H) / ...	-51%	Puffy Royal Mattress   Memory Foam Mattress   No.1 Mattress in a B...	-25%	Puf Adj
	\$599		\$1,999		\$1,249		

Repr

Goble and Jackson said they hope the Teamsters can help employees negotiate for higher pay, more consistent hours, and more scheduling transparency/consistency — things that might help newer employees stick around.

“I hope they’ll understand that what we’re asking for is reasonable,” Jackson said. “We want to work, and we want to work here. We don’t want to work somewhere else.”

*Shannon Sollitt is a [Report for America](#) corps member covering business accountability and sustainability for The Salt Lake Tribune. Your donation to match our RFA grant helps keep her writing stories like this one; please consider making a tax-deductible gift of any amount today by clicking [here](#).*

*Megan Banta is The Salt Lake Tribune’s data enterprise reporter, [a philanthropically supported position](#). The Tribune retains control over all editorial decisions.*