

# Philippines: Will the labor vote prevail in the midterm elections?

Thursday 2 May 2019, by [REY Aika](#) (Date first published: 1 May 2019).

**Labor Win, a coalition of leaders from workers' groups, hopes to bring together a "labor vote" that will help them win a Senate seat in the 2019 midterm elections. The coalition is facing challenges in different fronts: a disorganized labor movement and a lack of resources to mount a nationwide campaign. Despite these limitations, experts view the labor leaders' coming together as a "victory" for the movement.**

MANILA, Philippines – For a coalition of labor leaders, the dream is to elect the "true representatives" of workers in the Senate.

A big chunk of the Filipino population are composed of workers. In fact, the January Labor Force Survey this year showed that at least 41.4 million Filipinos are eligible to work.

But winning the workers' vote seems like a tall order for the labor-leaders-turned-Senate-bets, despite having unions to back them up.

The Labor Win coalition is composed of former Bayan Muna representative Neri Colmenares, Bukluran ng mga Manggagawang Pilipino (BMP) head Leody de Guzman, Federation of Free Workers (FFW) president Sonny Matula, Kilusang Mayo Uno founder Ernesto Arellano, and labor lawyer Allan Montaña

They aim to push for pro-worker and pro-poor policies in the Senate, notwithstanding the odds.

But preelection surveys say otherwise, with none of these candidates landing in the Magic 12 where they may have a statistical chance of winning.

More than a decade has passed since the Philippine electorate ushered in a labor vote with former senator and trade union leader Ernesto "Boy" Herrera. Will we see it happening again this midterm elections?

## Highs and lows of organized labor

Consolidating the labor vote is not an easy task. For years, organized labor has had its own ups and downs.

A 2009 study by political think tank Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES) had chronicled the "decline" in unionism in the Philippine workforce at that time, noting that union membership for both the public and private sector went down by 63% to 1.92 million in 2007 from the previous 3.57-million membership in 1995.

Given that the number of employed Filipinos was only 21.58 million in 2007, with only 1.92 million being union members, only 8.89% of the employed force were part of labor organizations.

In the 2009 study, FES said that organizing the labor force is “more difficult,” citing changes in the workplace – privatization of public services, rise of consulting employment arrangements, rapid pace of technological interventions in the workplace, and resistance to unions.

A decade later, the same is still happening.

Data in the past 6 years as consolidated by the Bureau of Local Relations show a promising rise in organized labor. But the numbers are not stellar still.

At least 8.18% of employed persons were part of unions or associations in 2014, or 3.4 million out of the total employed 41.6 million. A steady rise was evident in the coming years, with a 12.49% membership rate for the first quarter of 2018 as peak.

But the membership rate went down to 11.98% as of the first quarter of 2019, with only 4.7 million workers being part of organizations.

This table shows the percentage of union members among employed Filipinos

Year	Employed	Union members	%
2014	41,600,000	3,400,000	8.18
2015	39,000,000	3,400,000	8.72
2016	40,700,000	4,000,000	9.83
2017	40,000,000	4,900,000	12.25
2018	40,000,000	5,000,000	12.50
2019*	39,247,000	4,700,000	11.98

\*Employment statistics from 2014 to 2018 are from the April Labor Force Survey; 2019 is from the January Labor Force Survey.  
Source: Philippine Statistics Authority, Bureau of Local Relations. [Go to the table](#)

To break it down, there are 474,915 government employees part of public employees’ unions. In recent years, unionization peaked in 2017 when 545,199 government workers were part of an organization.

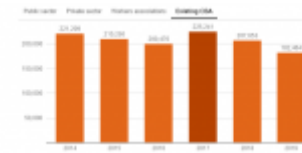
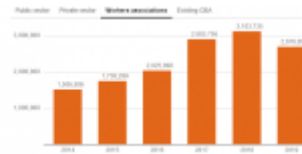
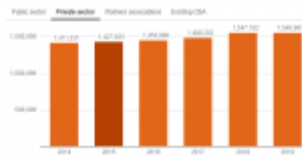
In the private sector, the figure inched up yearly, with the first quarter of 2019 having the most members at close to 1.55 million.

Despite the steady but slow rise in union members, less private sector workers are covered by collective bargaining agreements (CBA). In 2019, only about 182,000 employees are covered, down from 225,241 workers in 2017.

## How many are part of Organized labor?

The following four charts show the total reported members of public sector and private sector labor organizations, workers associations, and unions with existing collective bargaining agreement





The decline in CBA coverage can be attributed to the lower number of existing CBAs as well. In the first quarter of 2019, there were only 961 unions that were able to successfully negotiate CBAs, down from 2014 with 1,340 unions.

Meanwhile, the loose workers' associations saw a decline in members as well, despite the steady rise in the number of associations. In 2019, there are 66,407 workers' associations, almost double that in 2014 which had 35,411.

However, membership went down to 2.68 million in 2019 after peaking in 2018, when membership grew to 3.1 million.

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