

OPEN SHOP GAZETTE

VOLUME I | APRIL, 2018

Jonathan Lansner is a columnist for the **Orange County Register** and in the edition of March 25, 2018, he ran this story:

“Perhaps my Great-Aunt Fannie would have liked the Inland Empire”

“Fannie Lansner, sister of my paternal grandfather was among 123 women and 23 men who died in what’s known as the Triangle Fire. It was a preventable tragedy at a ninth-floor garment factory in New York City. The deaths and poor workplace standards sparked the American labor movement as well as modernized building safety codes.

On March 25, 1911, Fannie – an immigrant from Lithuania and a supervisor at the Triangle Waist Co. – directed co-workers out of the burning building, but her actions prevented her own timely exit. She was just 21.

“Guides Girls To Safety Until Her Own Escape Cut Off...THEN LEAPS FROM WINDOW TO DEATH ON PAVEMENT,” read the gruesome subhead of a New York Evening-Telegram’s story about her heroics.

The Triangle Fire took place on a Saturday just as the six-day workweek was ending. Working long hours in unsafe conditions for meager pay was a common employment practice in that era. You can thank post-fire passions stirred by organized labor for a vast array of workplace improvements – both in safety and compensation, most of which endure today.

Perhaps it’s complacency. Perhaps a new era. Great-Aunt Fannie might be saddened to see the union movement slumping in recent years. But a curious union hotbed is flourishing in the Inland Empire.

To track union membership trends, I filled my trusty spreadsheet with figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics and Unionstats.com. The latter is a database of government workplace figures compiled by two professors, Barry Hirsch of Georgia State University and David Macpherson of Trinity University.

The data show national union membership is down 5.5 percent in 10 years. In California, it’s up a barely perceptible 0.6 percent. And in Los Angeles and Orange counties, organized labor lost 15,341 jobs in a decade (2 percent) to 814,954 workers.

Yet a slew of large employers with organized-labor traditions – from logistics to manufacturing – have been lured to Riverside and San Bernardino counties for the region’s ample supply of cheaper Southern California real estate and workers. The Inland Empire’s swift population growth also means a growing government sector that’s heavily unionized.

In 2017, Inland Empire had 351,033 union workers, the fourth-largest group among 260 metro areas tracked behind the New York City region, L.A. – O.C. and Chicago. Keep in mind, the Inland Empire only has the 16th largest overall workforce.

And Inland Empire unions are growing, adding a stunning 72,248 jobs in 10 years. Yes, an increase of 26 percent. That’s double the growth rate of total employment in Riverside and San Bernardino counties since 2007. Basically, unions got nearly 4 out of 10 new jobs created in the past decade.

It adds up to 20.7 percent of all Inland Empire workers last year being union members, vs. 18.6 percent in ’07. That 2017 share ranked 19th–

highest nationwide. For metro areas with 1 million or more workers, only the new York's workforce was more unionized.

Private employers in Riverside and San Bernardino counties don't seem to mind unions. These bosses had 170,067 union workers, up 46,526 jobs, or 38 percent in a decade. Last year, 12.1 percent of the private sector was unionized (it was 9.9 percent in '07). That share trailed only New York City and Detroit among metros with 1 million or more private-industry employees.

Government work, the last great union stronghold, added 25,721 Inland jobs in 10 years. That's up 16.6 percent to 180,966 or 63 percent of public-sector employment in Riverside and San Bernardino counties.

Look, I know unions aren't perfect. Nor are they for every worker or every workplace. They're also losing clout and the nerve to use the muscle they have left.

Organized labor has faced corporate and government battles, leaving its reputation tarnished as workforces dwindled in the blue-collar industries once dominated by unions. It's no coincidence, though, that the decline in collective bargaining has paralleled increased financial challenges for the working class.

Nationwide, there were only seven major strikes – work stoppages impacting 1,000 workers or more – in 2017, the second-lowest count in records that date to 1947. In the past 10 years, unions have averaged 13 major strikes a year nationwide, vs. 31 annually in the previous 20 years and 218 in 1947 through 1987.

Of last year's seven major strikes, four occurred in California, including a two-day walkout last September by 2,300 Riverside County employees represented by Service Employees International Union's Local 721. Little progress has been made, and the workers are without a contract since November 2016.

But if you believe unions are bad for the business climate, ponder these trends.

In the past 10 years – from one economic peak to the current one – union-heavy Inland Empire employment rose by 13 percent. Statewide hiring grew jobs by 8 percent; nationally, 6 percent; and in L.A. – O.C., 4 percent.

Great-Aunt Fannie would be impressed.”

