



Are NLRA-Unionized Workers Better Off?



An Analysis of Wage Outcomes for RLA, NLRA, and Non-Union Workers in the Manufacturing & Transportation Sectors

August 2025

ARE NLRA-UNIONIZED WORKERS BETTER OFF?



Manufacturing and transportation sector unions are governed by one of two labor laws: the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) or the Railway Labor Act (RLA). RLA requires a longer and more formalized mediation process, and Congress has the power to intervene when deemed necessary. This results in fewer strikes. Over the past decade, aggressive NLRA union activity has not produced exceptional results for workers. RLA and less unionized industries achieved stronger wage growth and fewer disruptions, suggesting a more stable and sustainable labor model.

NLRA-governed unions strike more frequently; higher pay is a top demand.

- Unions use strike authorizations and work stoppages as leverage in contract negotiations.
 NLRA unions strike more often than RLA.
- Roughly 80% of manufacturing and transportation strikes cite pay as key demand.
- In transportation equipment manufacturing alone, over 20 strikes were authorized by union workers between 2015 to 2024.



Wage growth for highly unionized NLRA jobs lags RLA and less unionized groups.

- Manual labor, material moving, and skilled trades are essential and highly unionized manufacturing and transportation jobs.
- RLA-unionized workers had higher pay and faster wage growth than workers in the most unionized NLRA jobs.
- The least unionized NLRA jobs had better wage growth than all the highly unionized groups including RLA, NLRA, and the Postal Service.





Excessive union demands have resulted in major layoffs.

- Excessive pressure from unions can force restructuring and plant closures causing major layoffs.
- 60% of major manufacturing and transportation layoffs occurred at companies with unions.
- 87% of major transportation equipment manufacturing layoffs had unions; Most occurred within a year of strike activity.

Share Jobs Lost in Mass Layoffs* at Companies with Union Workers, 2015-241



Transportation Equipment Mfg.







¹ Major layoffs include those with 1,000+ jobs or more.

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KEY FINDINGS

August 2025

Over the past decade, labor unions representing manufacturing and transportation workers have actively engaged in strike authorizations and work stoppages to gain leverage in contract negotiations. However, recent literature and official data suggest that workers in these sectors may not realize outsized gains from aggressive union efforts.

This report analyzes the impact of strike actions on manufacturing and transportation industries governed by the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and the Railway Labor Act (RLA). The findings indicate that frequent strikes, elevated wage demands, and intensified union pressure in NLRA-governed industries contribute to mediocre wage outcomes, and, in some cases, have resulted in mass layoffs of workers via corporate restructuring and plant closures. In contrast, RLA-governed sectors, and even lesser unionized industries, demonstrate stronger wage performance and fewer disruptions, offering a potentially more sustainable labor framework for long-term growth.

The key takeaways are below.

- 1. Strike activity is more prevalent in NLRA-governed industries; wages were the top demand. Roughly 80% of manufacturing and transportation strikes cited pay as a key demand. Due to differences in labor laws, unions representing workers in NLRA-governed manufacturing and transportation industries (excluding air and rail), have more strikes authorizations and work stoppages than RLA industries. Transportation equipment manufacturing unions have been particularly active. From 2015 to 2024, the industry had over 20 strike actions, including some of the most disruptive work stoppages in recent history. It accounted for 76% of all manufacturing and transportation workhours lost during major strikes over the last ten years.
- 2. Aggressive union activity has not resulted in better wage performance. Installation, production, and transportation jobs in RLA-governed industries tend to earn higher pay and experience greater wage growth compared to the most highly unionized NLRA jobs with similar credentials. Overall, the least unionized NLRA jobs experienced the fastest wage growth.
 - a. **RLA-unionized jobs pay more.** In 2024, the average hourly wage for RLA-unionized jobs requiring a high school diploma was \$39, compared to \$37 for the Postal Service, \$27 for workers in the most highly unionized NLRA jobs, and \$26 for workers in the least unionized NLRA jobs.

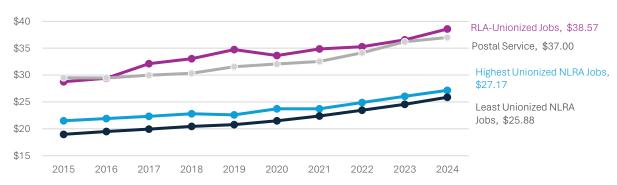




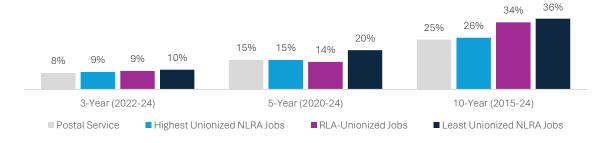
- b. The highest unionized NLRA jobs had slower wage growth. From 2015 to 2024, wages for RLA-unionized jobs grew 34% compared to 26% for the most unionized NLRA jobs. The least unionized jobs experienced the fastest wage growth during this period, 36%.
- c. Strike actions have not produced outsized wage gains. Michigan was home to the most disruptive manufacturing and transportation sector work stoppage of the past decade. In 2019, a strike at General Motors involved 46,000 employees and cost more than 1.3 million workhours. Despite high union activity, wage growth for Michigan's transportation equipment manufacturing workers did not outperform. Among the top 20 transportation equipment manufacturing states, Michigan ranks 9th in wage level and 13th in wage growth.
- 3. Excessive union demands contribute to layoffs. Aggressive wage demands reduce companies' financial flexibility and their ability to weather rising costs or economic shifts. While unions often protect against job losses in the short term, workers are still affected by restructurings and plant closures, which can result in larger-scale layoffs. Over the past decade, 60% of mass layoffs (affecting 1,000 workers or more) in manufacturing and transportation occurred at companies with union workers. Transportation equipment manufacturing, which is highly unionized, is especially vulnerable. Of the industry's 13 major layoffs in the past decade, 8 occurred within a year of the company experiencing a major strike authorization or work stoppage.

Wages for Installation, Production & Transportation Workers in Manufacturing & Transportation





PANEL B. CHANGE IN AVG. HOURLY WAGE











Introduction

This report examines the impact of union activity in the manufacturing and transportation sectors, with a specific comparison between those operating under the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and the Railway Labor Act (RLA). Using data from the past decade, the analysis highlights a marked disparity in strike frequency, wage outcomes, and workforce stability between NLRA- and RLA-governed organizations. It also explores how excessive union pressure contributes to increased volatility, uncertainty, and, in many cases, long-term harm to workers through layoffs and stagnant wage growth.

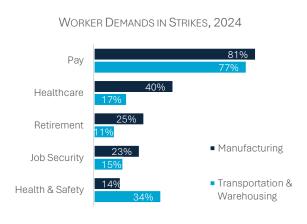
RLA-governed unions have less strike activity.

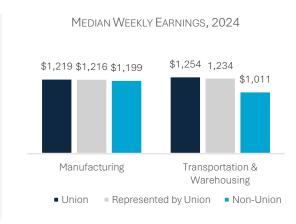
NLRA and RLA establish distinct procedures for labor organization and dispute resolution. Nearly all private sector unions are governed by NLRA, except for the railroad and airline industries which fall under RLA. Both labor laws guarantee the right to unionize, collectively bargain, and engage in concerted activities such as strikes. However, RLA aims to prevent disruptions to commerce and travel by requiring a longer and formalized mediation process before workers can legally strike, plus Congress has the power to intervene when deemed necessary.² As a result, RLA-governed industries experience far fewer strikes, and, as this research shows, produces similar, if not better, outcomes for workers.

Pay is the top demand of most strikes, but aggregate wage data indicates mixed outcomes.

The most common worker demand in manufacturing and transportation sector strikes is pay. Yet, national-level data shows the wage premium of manufacturing workers in unions, which are NLRA-governed, is negligible. In comparison, unionized transportation workers (both RLA- and NLRA-governed), have a 24% premium over non-union workers. (Figure 1) However, the ability to derive meaning from such aggregated data is limited. To explore union outcomes in-depth, this research analyzes wage performance by industry, occupation, and state over the past decade.

FIGURE 1. UNION WORKERS STRIKE FOR HIGHER PAY; MANUFACTURING UNION WAGE PREMIUM IN MINIMAL ³





¹ This research was supported by the National Association of Wholesaler-Distributors. We gratefully acknowledge NAW's financial assistance, which made this work possible. The views expressed are solely those of the authors.

² National Mediation Board. *Overview of the Railway Labor Act*.

³ BLS. Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey; Kallas, Iyer, & Friedman (2024).





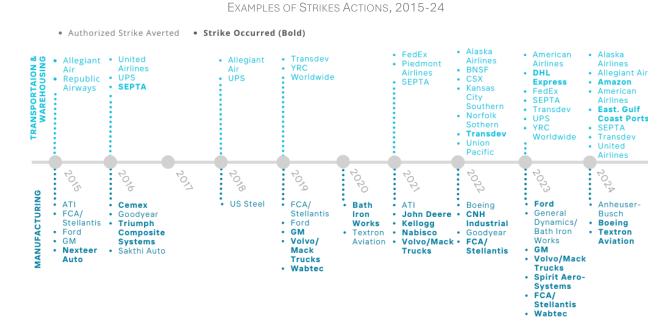
Companies unionized under NLRA experience more strike activity than those operating under RLA

Strikes, and even the threat of strikes, at major manufacturing and transportation companies introduce significant uncertainty and volatility. Internally, the potential for a strike can delay or alter decisions related to capital expenditures and long-term investments. Externally, this uncertainty drives customers to secure alternative suppliers or logistics partners in anticipation of potential supply chain disruptions. Excessive union demands can place additional financial pressure on companies, potentially leading to workforce reductions or restrained future hiring—outcomes that ultimately harm the very workers such demands aim to support.4

Strike actions are more frequent for NLRA-governed unions.

Strike actions, including authorizations and work stoppages, are more common among NLRAgoverned. This is largely due to their local operational structure, broader worker coverage, and more streamlined processes for initiating strikes. The expiration of Collective Bargaining Agreements (CBAs) often signals new contract negotiations, which can increase the likelihood of strike activity. Between 2015 and 2024, nearly 300 CBAs in the manufacturing and transportation sectors expired, offering a meaningful window to assess strike patterns. During this period, unions have frequently employed strikes as a strategic bargaining tool. Major employers in these sectors—such as Allegiant Air, FCA/Stellantis, Ford, General Motors, UPS, and Volvo/Mack Trucks—have faced multiple strike actions. (Figure 2)

FIGURE 2. STRIKES ACTIONS ARE MORE PREVALENT IN NLRA-GOVERNED INDUSTRIES⁵



⁴See for example, Mayer, Gerald (2004) and Palagashvili, Liya, and Ravena Sharfuddin (2025).

⁵ Analysis of press releases and news articles identified via LexisNexis search.



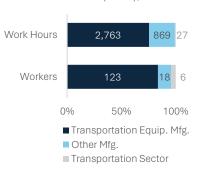


Transportation equipment manufacturers are highly impacted.

Over the past decade, unions representing workers in transportation-equipment manufacturing, especially major auto and aircraft makers, have mounted some of the largest strikes in recent history. Between 2015 and 2024, the industry experienced at least 21 strike actions (Figure 2 above) and comprised 10 of the 18 major strikes logged across all manufacturing and transportation. These walkouts involved 122,800 workers and idled nearly 2.8 million labor-hours. Transportation equipment manufacturing accounted for 84% of affected workers and 76% of total labor hours lost due to major manufacturing and transportation strikes over the past decade. (Figure 3)

FIGURE 3. TRANSPORTATION EQUIPMENT MANUFACTURERS MOST IMPACT BY STRIKES⁶

Work Stoppages (000s), 2015-24



RLA wages outperform or track wages of the most unionized NLRA transportation and manufacturing groups

NLRA union actions have not resulted in outsized wage performance for workers. In fact, they are often not better off than their counterparts with similar occupations in RLA-governed industries or lesser unionized NLRA industries. This analysis of wage performance is based on a large dataset constructed using official and third-party data, including industry- and state-specific occupational wages from by Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), Regional Price Parities (RPP) to adjust for variations in cost of living from the Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), and detailed third-party estimates of union membership. We divided industry-level occupations into quartiles based on unionization and compared performance of the most and least unionized groups. (Box 1)

BOX 1. METHODOLOGY SUMMARY

- 1. Primary Dataset: We collected industry-level occupational wage data by state for installation, production, and transportation and material moving jobs in manufacturing and transportation from BLS for 2015-24.
- 2. <u>Wage Comparability:</u> We calculated the weighted average based on the occupational employment within industries and sectors. Since cost of living varies across states, we adjusted wages with BEA Regional Price Parities.
- 3. <u>Educational Attainment</u>: Since jobs vary by industry, we grouped occupations by education attainment, assigned by BLS. We focus on high school diploma or equivalent, which cover most manufacturing and transportation jobs.
- 4. <u>Union Membership:</u> Since detailed wage data for union and nonunion workers is unavailable, we created a union-density measure using occupational and industry union estimates (% of workers in unions) published by economists Barry Hirsch, (Georgia State University), David Macpherson (Trinity University), and William Even (Miami University) on unionstats.com. We compare the most unionized occupation/industry groups (top 25%) to the least unionized groups in manufacturing and transportation (bottom 25%).
- 5. <u>NLRA and RLA Comparison:</u> Since the union data does not differentiate between NLRA and RLA, we followed the <u>Congressional Research Service</u> approach and assign air and rail transportation (NAICS 481 and 482) as RLA and all other industries as NLRA.

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⁶ BLS. Work Stoppages Database.





Installation, production, and transportation are key jobs that tend to be more unionized.

Manual labor, material moving, and skilled-trade positions form the backbone of manufacturing and transportation. They employ the largest share of workers in both sectors and tend to be more highly unionized.

In 2024, the manufacturing and transportation sectors employed 20.2 million workers in the United States. Nearly two-thirds worked in installation, production, and transportation jobs, while 22% were in administrative, management and business roles. Generally, hands-on jobs are more highly unionized. According to the BLS, 13% of workers in installation, production, and transportation jobs were union members in 2024, compared to 6% in administrative, management and business jobs. ⁷ To produce a more meaningful wage comparison, we focus on roles that require a high-school diploma or equivalent—the educational level that encompasses most of these jobs. (Figure 4)

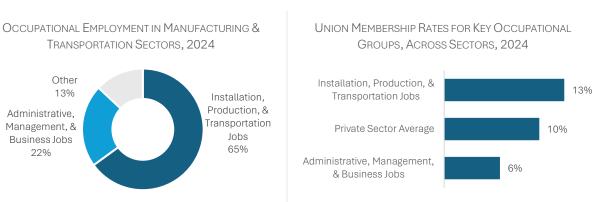


FIGURE 4. INSTALLATION, PRODUCTION, AND TRANSPORTATION JOBS ARE MORE HIGHLY UNIONIZED⁸

Wages for RLA-union jobs outperform NLRA-union jobs with the same education requirements.

In 2024, RLA-unionized air and rail jobs that require a high-school diploma paid an average of \$38.57 per hour. Workers in the Postal Service earned \$37.00 while the most heavily unionized NLRA transportation and manufacturing jobs averaged \$27.17.9 The least unionized workers earned an average of \$25.88 per hour, approximately 5% lower than the highest unionized NLRA jobs. (Figure 5, Panel A)

⁷ 'Installation, Production, and Transportation Jobs' includes Installation, Maintenance and Repair Occupations (49-000); Production Occupations (51-000), and Transportation and Material Moving Occupations (53-000); 'Administrative, Management, and Business Jobs' includes Business and Financial Operations Occupations (13-000), Management Occupations (11-000), and Office and Administrative Support Occupations (43-000).

⁸ BLS. Occupational Employment Statistics; BLS. Union Membership.

⁹ The most highly NLRA-unionized groups are the industry-occupation combinations in the manufacturing and non-RLA transportation sectors that fall in the top 25th percentile of union densities (share of workers in unions). The least unionized are the lowest 25% of union densities.

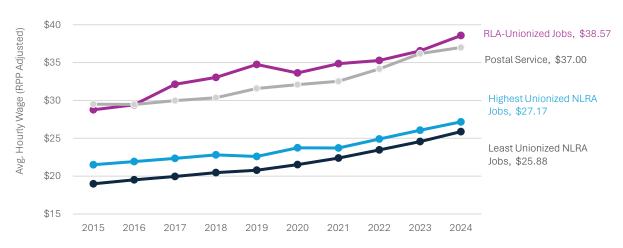




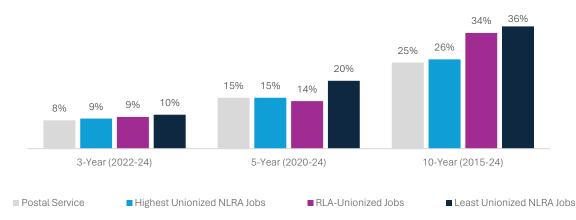
Because pay reflects many factors—job risk, skill demands, and labor supply, among others—wage growth is a better gauge of union power. Over the past decade, high-school-level jobs under the RLA saw average hourly pay rise 34%, outperforming the growth recorded in the most unionized NLRA occupation-industry groups (26%) and in the Postal Service (25%). Notably, ten-year wage growth for workers in the least unionized occupations and industries outperformed the highest unionized NLRA occupation-industry groups by ten percentage points, narrowing the gap over time. Five- and three-year growth rates show a similar pattern across the three groups. (Figure 5, Panel B)

FIGURE 5. RLA INDUSTRIES HAVE HIGHER WAGES & FASTER WAGE GROWTH





PANEL B. CHANGE IN AVG. HOURLY WAGE







Case Study: Michigan's Transportation Equipment Manufacturing Workers

NLRA-governed unions representing workers in transportation equipment manufacturing have been among the most active in the past decade, especially in Michigan. The 2019 General Motors walkout alone involved 46,000 employees and cost more than 1.3 million work-hours. Given the extensive union activity, these workers would be expected to outperform their peers in wage gains. Yet, outcomes for the state's transportation equipment workers have not outpaced those in other industries or states.

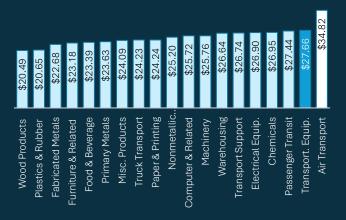
- Wage Comparison Across Industries in Michigan: Transportation equipment manufacturing workers with
 high-school degree-level jobs earned an average of \$28 per hour in 2024. While the pay level ranks
 second in manufacturing and transportation, after RLA-unionized air transportation, wage growth has
 lagged. Significant strike action over the past decade has not produced outsized results, transportation
 equipment workers' wage growth ranked 15th, behind most transportation and lesser unionized
 manufacturing industries in Michigan. (Figure 6, Panel A)
- Wage Comparison in the Same Industry Across States: Of the top twenty states for transportation
 equipment manufacturing, Michigan's wage level ranked 9th and growth ranked 13th, behind a mix of
 highly unionized manufacturing states, like in Washington and California, and less unionized ones, like
 Texas, North Carolina, and Florida. Despite its active unions, Michigan workers' wages underperform
 compared to many other states. (Figure 6, Panel B)

FIGURE 6. WAGE PERFORMANCE FOR HIGH-SCHOOL DIPLOMA-LEVEL INSTALLATION, PRODUCTION & TRANSPORTATION JOBS

PANEL A. MANUFACTURING & TRANSPORTATION INDUSTRIES IN MICHIGAN

Avg. Hourly Wage (RPP Adjusted), 2024

Avg. Wage Growth, 2015-24

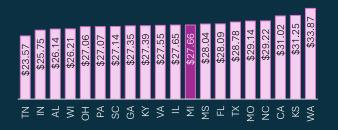




PANEL B. TOP 20 STATES EMPLOYING TRANSPORTATION EQUIPMENT MFG. WORKERS

Avg. Hourly Wage (RPP Adjusted), 2024

Avg. Wage Growth, 2015-24









Excessive union pressure leads to mass layoffs, ultimately harming workers

Workforce reduction decisions are complex and influenced by various factors, yet union-related cost pressures are frequently cited as a key contributor. A recent study by the Mercatus Center highlights how excessive union demands can lead to slower job growth and reduced investment (see Box 2). This dynamic was also noted over a decade earlier by the Congressional Research Service, which found that increased union bargaining power can misallocate resources, with higher wages sometimes resulting in reduced employment among unionized workers.¹²

Many large-scale layoffs impact union workers.

Over the past decade, mass layoffs in the manufacturing and transportation sectors have predominantly affected jobs at companies with union workers. From 2015 to 2024 (excluding pandemic-related events in 2020), there were 44 major layoffs in these sectors, each involving 1,000 workers or more. In total, nearly 91,000 jobs were lost. Notably, 60% were at unionized companies, including major employers such as GM, Boeing, Yellow Corporation, and U.S. Steel. (Figure 7, Panel A)

Transportation equipment manufacturing jobs have suffered.

Frequent strike activity has had a significant impact on the transportation equipment manufacturing sector. Over the past decade, over one-third of the massive layoffs occurred in this industry. Of the jobs lost, more than 87% were at companies with union workers. (Figure 7, Panel B).

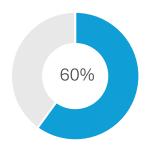
There is a pattern of strike actions coinciding with layoffs. GM, for example, experienced strikes in 2015, 2019, and 2023, and reported five mass layoffs between 2016 and

Box 2. Negative Impacts of Too Much Union Pressure

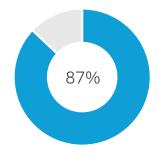
"Excessive union demands limit job growth and work opportunities. When unions press for unsustainable terms, employment growth slows and job openings decline. Firms respond by cutting investment— especially in R&D and long-term capital— weakening productivity and profitability. Over time, this raises the likelihood of downsizing or closure, reducing both jobs and the size of the unionized workforce." 10

FIGURE 7. MASSIVE LAYOFFS IMPACT UNION WORKERS, 2015-24 11

PANEL A. SHARE OF MANUFACTURING &
TRANSPORTATION JOBS LOST AT COMPANIES WITH
UNION WORKERS



PANEL B. SHARE TRANSPORTATION EQUIPMENT MANUFACTURING JOBS LOST AT COMPANIES WITH UNION WORKERS



¹⁰ Palagashvili, Liya, and Ravena Sharfuddin (2025).

¹¹ Analysis of WARN database.

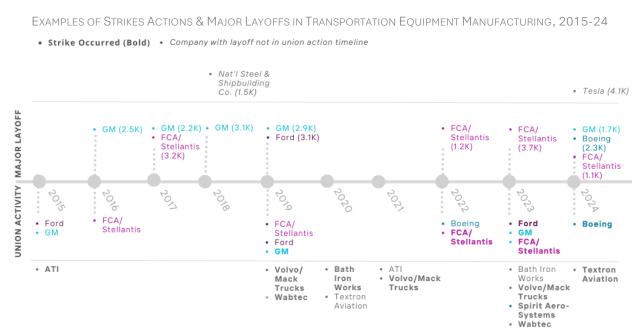
¹² Mayer, Gerald (2004).





2024, affecting a total of 12,400 jobs. Similarly, Fiat-Chrysler (FCA)/Stellantis faced strike activity in 2016, 2019, 2022, and 2023, alongside significant layoffs in 2017, 2022, 2023, and 2024, impacting approximately 9,200 workers. In total, 8 of the 13 mass layoffs occurred within a year of a strike authorization or work stoppage. (Figure 8)

FIGURE 8. STRIKES ACTIONS HAVE COINCIDED WITH MASS LAYOFFS¹³



Conclusion

Companies operating under the NLRA framework experience substantially more strike activity than those regulated by the RLA, resulting in increased operational disruptions and uncertainty. However, this heightened union activity has not translated into superior wage outcomes. In fact, the most highly unionized NLRA jobs often lag behind RLA and less unionized jobs, especially in terms of wage growth.

Rather than securing exceptional gains for workers, union-driven wage pressure in NLRA-governed industries has coincided with job losses and large-scale layoffs. In contrast, RLA-governed industries have demonstrated stronger wage performance with fewer labor disruptions, indicating a more stable and sustainable labor model for long-term growth.

These findings suggest that excessive union activity, especially when it leads to strikes, can erode workforce stability and hinder economic performance. As such, policymakers and industry leaders should strive to strike a careful balance between upholding labor rights and fostering resilient supply chains and competitive business environment.

¹³ Analysis of WARN database and press releases and news articles identified via LexisNexis search; BLS Work Stoppages Database.





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