



Frequently Asked Questions

Q I am a professional...what can a union do for me?

A By joining with your colleagues in a union organization at your workplace you benefit in many ways. On the job, your union brings together the collective strength of you and your co-workers to insure meaningful negotiations with management for an equitable contract. Through ongoing oversight activities, your union sees to it that the provisions of the contract are carried out. Besides wages and salaries, other areas that can be negotiated include: cost of living raises, adequate pensions, vacations, equitable promotion systems and transfer policies, and a workable grievance system. During the life of the contract, the union continues its representation and work assisting individuals who have been wronged, if necessary going to third party impartial arbitration.

Outside of the work place, the union works for you as well. The status of your profession and the well-being of the individual practitioner are not only affected by employing institutions but by government as well. Union organizations have been extremely effective in advocating the cause of their members in the halls of government at the federal, state, and county levels. Every day unions fight hard for their members in Congress, state legislatures, city hall, the courts and in the departments and agencies of government.

Q Aren't unions really for blue collar and other lower paid workers? Why would professionals want or need a union?

A Many professionals believe there is a basic antagonism between unionism and their profession. They have a picture of unions as adversarial - picking fights or imposing work rules that will limit employees as well as management.

Professionals are employees who have the same problems as other workers. Every high tech employee, for example, needs a decent wage, the guarantee of fair benefits, protection from unjust treatment, respect, recognition of skills, education, and expertise, whether they meet the legalistic definition of "professional" or not.

The reality is that professional employees are increasingly losing control of their work life. At non-union worksites management makes all the decisions concerning the wages, benefits, and working conditions for professional employees. This is generating conflict between employees concerned about the delivery of their professional services, and human resource managers who appear more concerned with the bottom line. These professional employees are turning increasingly to unions to protect their interests. Today, roughly two-thirds of all unionized white-collar employees are professionals. Their level of unionization exceeds that of the workforce as a whole. (Details about the white collar workforce can be found in the DPE's publication "Current Statistics on White Collar Employees: 2000 Edition".)

Q But isn't it "unprofessional" to join a union?

A Academy Award winners Tom Hanks, Susan Sarandon and Kevin Spacey don't think so. Neither do Grammy Award winners Tony Bennett and Carlos Santana. World renowned physicist Albert Einstein and the late Pulitzer Prize winning, Washington Post Cartoonist HerBlock were also prominent union members. These are just a handful of artists, scientists, journalists, educators and others who have been at the top of their profession and who have strongly supported their unions. Union-member professionals are also teachers, college professors, nurses, TV broadcasters, librarians in your local community.

Unions and their white-collar workers helps preserve professional integrity and respect on the job. An employee of a large corporation frequently loses professional autonomy in the corporate bureaucracy. The professional is not always free to offer independent judgments based solely on professional considerations. Indeed, without a proper contract and a union to police it, employees may be fired or penalized for offering a view that is at odds with their supervisors. Nothing could be less professional.

According to the US Department of Labor, over three million professional and technical employees are already participating in collective bargaining organizations. This constitutes approximately 50% of those professional employees eligible for union membership (i.e. neither managerial nor self-employed). Represented are such varied practitioners as musicians, doctors, nurses, actors, broadcasters, school teachers, college professors and engineers.

Q Ok, let's talk specifics--what about bread and butter issues like wages and salaries. Is there any difference between working union versus non-union?

A Women and men who belong to unions bring home bigger paychecks than non-union workers. With union representation, workers earn 34 percent more than unrepresented workers, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. This "union advantage"—more money in union members' paychecks—exists in almost every occupation, from service and factory workers to clerical and professional employees. Today's unions mean even more for women and minorities. Union women earn 40 percent more than non-union women, African American union members earn 44 percent more and for Latino workers,

the “union advantage” is a whopping 53 percent! So it doesn’t cost to join a union , it actually pays and pays well!

Q How about benefits—are they any better?

A Union families have much better benefits:

- Some 85 percent of union workers in large and medium-sized workplaces have employer-provided health care benefits, compared with only 74 percent of unrepresented workers.
- If injury or illness keeps us off the job, nearly two-thirds of union workers (63 percent) have short-term disability benefits, compared with less than half (47 percent) of unrepresented workers.
- On pensions, union members are much more likely to enjoy secure retirement benefits. Nearly eight in 10 union workers—compared with about four in 10 non-union workers—have “defined-benefit” pension plans, which are federally insured and provide a guaranteed monthly benefit. And, because union members are better paid during our working years, we earn larger pensions—and have a better chance to save for retirement.

Q What about job security—do the unions make a difference here too?

A Besides protecting workers from arbitrary employer actions relating to discipline and dismissals, because unions make jobs better union members are more likely to stay at their jobs than non-union workers. That’s one reason why six out of every 10 union members have been with the same employer for 10 years or more—compared with only three of every 10 unrepresented workers. Better training, lower turnover and workers’ voice in decision-making about how work gets done also mean that unions increase productivity, according to most recent studies.

Q What can a union offer me on things like working conditions, hours of work, etc.?

A Union contracts often provide for fair and flexible working hours, better pay for overtime and work on evenings and weekends, more paid holidays, paid family and medical leave and employer help with child care and elder care. Besides your union contract, unions lobby for better laws and programs to help America’s working families. Unions were a major force behind passage of the Family and Medical Leave Act and are working hard for improved child care, elder care and other policies. With today’s unions, working people have a better chance to balance not only our family budgets—but our family schedules as well. At a time when balancing the demands of jobs and families is a challenge for most working Americans, today’s unions help working women and men gain some control over our lives.

Q As a professional, my training has taught me to be a problem solver. Does the collective bargaining process always have to be adversarial?

A No it doesn't. However, in the "new economy" it is incumbent upon both sides—labor and management—to devise new ways to bargain. The emergence of new and innovative models of collective bargaining is already underway. The American economy is in the throes of dynamic change - from blue collar to white, from manufacturing to service, from low skill to high, from hands to brains. In the process, technological change is widening the scope of collective bargaining as professional employees increasingly are demanding a voice in the workplace and a say in their futures.

For example, recently seven national unions—all DPE affiliates—representing over 64,000 front-line care givers covered by more than 20 local unions bargained collectively with Kaiser Permanente, one of the nation's largest health care providers. In a historic five-year agreement, their front line health care workers will have a greater voice in the crucial decisions affecting the quality of patient care at Kaiser facilities. In many other unionized workplaces, labor and management today are exploring numerous partnerships and innovative methods of collectively bargaining along with problem solving arrangements.

Q Won't a union stifle individual achievement with things like raises and promotions determined solely by seniority?

A Salaries and promotions are bona fide subjects for collective bargaining. Without a union, management makes these decisions unilaterally, usually without any worker input. Through collective bargaining, management and union must agree on the mechanisms to be used, and that agreement is included in a legally binding contract. There are no preconditions. Employees, through their elected union representatives, may bargain for any viable system they believe best suits their profession and employment condition. For example, some union contracts provide not only for annual cost of living increase but as well for a pool of dollars for merit increases that work in combination to assure minimum equity while providing for recognition of individual achievement.

Seniority need not be the only criterion for promotion. A formal procedure could be devised which would include ratings by both supervisors and peers, credit for advanced education and training programs, and anything else that is deemed relevant by the professional group. A formal promotion and layoff procedure with rules known by all is preferable to no ground rules at all. But such a system can only be devised and implemented by a union and its members.

Q What guarantees do I have that my union leadership won't commit me to follow rules with which I don't agree?

A Union officers are elected by the grassroots membership of the union. Federal law requires that secret ballot procedures be used, and that elections for local officers be held at least every three years. Indeed, the right of the individual to affect policy in a union is far better protected by law and the constitution, rules and procedures of the union than in any other private organization.

Q As a professional, will I lose individual rights if I join a union?

A In a non-union work place, management retains the legal right to make all decisions regarding our jobs. Benefits can be arbitrarily cut including pay, pensions, health care, severance, vacations and holidays without notice to the employees. With a union, benefits and other working conditions cannot be changed at the drop of a hat; they have to be negotiated, and the union members can vote for or against the proposed changes. Even during difficult times, the actions of the employer must be justified to the members of the union for them to make an informed choice.

Q **Will having a union make an employer less competitive?**

A Unions do not ask for more in a contract than an employer can afford. They know that the worst possible disservice that a union could do to its membership is to make the employer less competitive. Many of the world's largest and most successful businesses are unionized.

Furthermore, a union contract is nothing more than a set of agreed-to rules that governs our economic relationship with management and the stockholders who own the resources and tools we use to build our shared product. All employers want rules to stabilize their competitive process. We too would like a contract that will allow us a stable economic and work environment upon which to plan our lives. The only way we can do that is through a legally binding, negotiated contract that gives professionals a voice on the job.

Q **Does being “pro-union” mean that you are “anti-management?”**

A Being pro-union helps create stronger employers! Unions want the employer to be successful, and it is not ungrateful or disloyal to want a voice in our workplace. Your employer's business was undoubtedly built on the commitment to be the best in its field. Unfortunately at many work places the balance has shifted from benefits for all stakeholders -- management, employees, stockholders, suppliers, and the community -- to benefits for only a few. You--the employees--make this employer what it is, and you should have a voice in exchange for your contributions that make the employer successful. Besides, if you work in the private sector your CEO has a contract that spells out to the letter his/her salary, bonuses, severance package and other benefits. No one questions their loyalty to the company, so why should it be any different for you?

Q **How democratic are unions?**

A Unions are among the most democratic institutions in our country. You get to decide if you want to sign a representation card indicating your interest in the union. You decide to vote yes or no for union representation in a government-supervised election process.

Then if the union is voted in, you decide what you and your colleagues decide what to propose in your first-contract bargaining. You decide which of your co-workers will be on the negotiating team. You then vote to ratify the contract...or not. You vote on who will be your workplace representative. You also have a vote on who will be the officials of your local union.

Q What's a Local Union?

A A union is set up kind of like the United States. There is a national government, but many of the decisions that really affect you are on the state level. This is even truer of a union. There is the parent union that oversees national operations. But the Local union takes care of the contract, helps employees that want help with managerial problems, etc. And decisions regarding local issues are made by the grassroots membership at the local level and not dictated from on high.

Q What is a union shop?

A This means that all employees in the bargaining unit must share in the cost of union representation. It is a standard part of most contracts. It enables the union to bargain from a stronger position, which benefits all employees. But ultimately you the member decide whether or not this protection is part of your collective bargaining agreement.

Q How many workers are employed in the professional and technical workforce?

A More than 25 million workers are employed in the professional and technical workforce. More than one in five of these highly trained, highly educated people are represented by unions. (Details about the workforce can be found in the DPE's publication "The Professional and Technical Work Force: A New Frontier for Unions".)

Q Women make up a large portion of the office workers in this country. Are they represented in the professional and technical workforce as well?

A Women account for almost half of the entire workforce and constitute the majority of workers in two occupational categories expected to grow rapidly between 1998 and 2008: professional and technical occupations. In fact women have been earning more Bachelor's degrees than men since 1982 and they have been earning more Master's degrees than men since 1981. Women also make up --% of union professionals. (Details about the women in the workforce can be found in the DPE's publication "Salaried and Professional Women: Relevant Statistics".)

Q How come unions are so involved in politics?

A At a time when America's politics are dominated by corporate money, today's unions help working families make our voices heard in our communities and our country.

- In communities, unions promote local economic development, jobs with living wages and public concerns—from better schools to clean air and water. And through our unions, America's workers help our neighbors by providing community services and disaster relief.
- At the state and national levels, unions are one of the only effective voices for working families and for social and economic justice—from civil rights and women's rights to the minimum wage, job safety, educational opportunity, environmental protection, Social Security, Medicare and Medicaid.

Unions help working families answer money-power with people-power. Today's unions listen to members about their concerns, pursue a Working Families Agenda, inform members about current issues and let members know whether their public officials are helping or hurting working families. And our unions give us opportunities to make our voices heard on the issues that matter most.