



I'm a Professional. What Can a Union Do for Me?

Joining with your colleagues in a union at your workplace offers many benefits. 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. Negotiations are not limited to only wages and salaries, but can also include staffing and overtime, safety and health, cost of living raises, provisions for continuing education, adequate pensions, vacations, equitable promotion systems and transfer policies, and a workable grievance system. Through your union, you and your co-workers oversee carrying out the provisions of the contract. If necessary, a union may take contract violations to third-party impartial arbitration.

To learn more about the benefits of joining a union, read DPE's report, "The Benefits of Collective Bargaining for Professional and Technical Workers."

Outside of the workplace, unions work for you as well. The status of your profession and the well-being of the individual practitioner are affected not only by employing institutions but also by government. Union organizations have been extremely effective in advocating on behalf of their members in the halls of government at the federal, state, and county levels. Every day unions work hard for their members in Congress, state legislatures, city hall, the courts, and other departments and agencies of government. Additionally, unions offer professionals the opportunity to meet and interact with other professionals in their field or in related areas of work.

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

Professionals are employees who have the same problems as other workers. Every Registered Nurse or high-tech employee, for example, needs a chance to do her or his job well: sane hours, a manageable workload, a decent wage, the guarantee of fair benefits, protection from unjust treatment, respect, and recognition of skills, education, and expertise.

The reality is professional employees are increasingly losing control of their work lives. In non-union environments, most decisions concerning the wages, benefits, and working conditions for professional employees rest solely with the management. This structure leads to conflict between professionals concerned about the quality of their work and human resource managers more concerned with the bottom line. In many instances, professionals turn to unions to support their efforts and advocate on their behalf.

For the latest statistics about unionized professionals, check out the DPE Fact Sheets at <http://dpeaflcio.org/programs-publications/issue-fact-sheets/>.

But isn't it “unprofessional” to join a union?

Professionals work through their unions to preserve professional integrity and respect on the job. The professional is not always free to offer independent judgments based solely on professional considerations. Without a proper contract and a union to support it, employees may be fired or penalized for offering a view that is at odds with their supervisors. Nothing could be less professional.

In non-union environments, most decisions concerning the wages, benefits, and working conditions for professional employees rest solely with management. This structure leads to conflict between professionals concerned about the quality of their work and management that is more concerned with the short-term bottom line. In many instances, professionals turn to unions to establish a formal mechanism for communication with management.

How effective are unions at improving wages and benefits?

Women and men who are represented by unions bring home bigger paychecks than non-union workers. With union representation, workers earned 21 percent more per week than unrepresented workers, in 2014, 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. In 2014, union women earned 24 percent more per week than non-union women, African American union members earned 25 percent more, Asian workers earned four percent more, and for Latino workers, the “union advantage” was 29 percent.

Union members are also much more likely than non-union members to have an employer-provided healthcare and pension plan.

How about benefits — are they any better?

Union members have much better benefits:

- As of 2014, 94 percent of civilian union members had access to an employer-provided health care plan, compared with only 68 percent of unrepresented workers.
- Union members are far less likely to have to choose between caring for their health and losing their jobs. Eighty-three percent of union members have paid sick leave, compared to only 62 percent of non-union workers.
- On retirement benefits, union members are much more likely to enjoy a secure retirement. Eighty-six percent of union members participate in a retirement plan, while only 48 percent of non-union workers do so. The majority of union members participate in defined-benefit plans. Because union members are better

paid during their working years, they earn larger pensions — and have a better chance to save for retirement.

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Compensation Survey, March 2014.

What about job security — do unions make a difference?

Unions protect workers from arbitrary employer actions relating to discipline and dismissals. That protection makes jobs better and often leads union members to stay at their jobs longer than non-union workers. Better training, lower turnover and a clear role for workers' voices in making decisions about how work gets done also mean that unions increase productivity.

What can a union offer me on things like working conditions and hours of work?

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 a union contract, unions lobby for better laws and programs to help America's working people. 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, professionals have a better chance to balance both their budgets and their schedules. Balancing the demands of work and family is a challenge for most working Americans, and today's unions help professionals gain more control over their lives.

As a professional, my training leads me to try to solve problems. Does the collective bargaining process always have to be adversarial?

No, it doesn't and is often not adversarial. In the modern economy, both labor and management have to devise new ways to bargain. The emergence of innovative models is well underway. 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, national unions — many of whom are DPE affiliates — representing over 90,000 front-line caregivers in almost 30 union locals bargained collectively with Kaiser Permanente, one of the nation's largest health care providers. Their agreement gives front-line health care workers 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 partnerships as well as innovative ways to collectively bargain contracts and solve problems.

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

Salaries and promotions are subjects for collective bargaining. Without a union, management is able to make such decisions unilaterally. Through collective bargaining,



management and the union must agree on the mechanisms to be used and standards to be employed in an agreement. Professionals, through their elected union representatives, may bargain for any viable wage and promotion system they believe best suits their profession and employment.

For example, many union contracts that include professionals provide not only for wages based on years of experience and cost of living, but also allow for pay above the listed wage scales. The combination assures both recognition of individual achievement and a minimum of equity for the work being produced.

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 professionals. A formal promotion and layoff procedure with rules known by all is preferable to no rules at all. Such a system can only be devised and implemented by a union and its members.

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

There are no guarantees that you will agree with everything contained in a union contract. A contract must be approved by a majority vote of the union members in the bargaining unit. Also, union officers are elected by the members. Federal law requires that secret ballot procedures be used and that elections for local officers be held at least every three years. An individual has a right, protected by law and union rules and procedures, to affect union policy. There is no similarly protected right to affect change in any other private organization.

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

In a non-union workplace, management retains the legal right to make all decisions regarding the workplace. Benefits — including pay, pensions, health care, severance, vacations, and holidays — can be arbitrarily cut without notice to the employees. With a union, benefits and other working conditions cannot be changed at the whim of a manager or upper management; any changes to terms and conditions of employment have to be negotiated, and the members of the union or their elected representatives are able to vote for or against proposed changes. This system makes it more likely that an employer will avoid actions that it cannot justify to its employees.

Will having a union make my employer less competitive?

Unions do not ask for more in a contract than an employer can afford. They know that the worst disservice a union could do to its members is to make the employer less competitive. Many of the world's largest and most successful businesses are unionized. A union contract is nothing more than a set of rules that govern the relationship among those who carry out the work, management, and stockholders, in the case of publicly



owned corporations. All employers want rules to stabilize their competitive process. Professionals seek a contract that will allow a stable work environment upon which to plan their lives. The only way to guarantee that stability is through a legally binding, negotiated contract that offers professionals a voice on the job.

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

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. Most businesses were built on their commitment to be the best in their fields. Unfortunately, at many workplaces the balance has shifted from benefits for all stakeholders — management, employees, stockholders, suppliers, and the community — to benefits for only a few. Those who carry out the work also contribute to an employer’s success and should have a voice in exchange.

Think of the situation this way: If you work in the private sector — and increasingly in the non-profit sector — your Chief Executive Officer (CEO) has a contract that spells out to the letter his or her salary, bonuses, severance package, and other benefits. No one questions the loyalty of the CEO to the organization, so why should it be any different for the professionals who work there?

How democratic are unions?

Unions are among the most democratic institutions in our country. The choice to sign a representation card indicating interest in the union is left solely to the individual. That individual may decide to vote yes or no for union representation in a government-supervised election process or sign a card for an employer to count. If a union is voted in, the represented members decide as a group what to propose in bargaining. The represented members decide which of your co-workers will be on the negotiating team. Each person in the bargaining unit votes to ratify the contract...or not. The represented members vote on who will be workplace representatives and who will be the officials of the local union. At every level, the professionals represented by a union shape and guide it.

What’s a Local Union?

The United States has a national government, but many of the decisions that really affect everyday life are made and carried out on the state or local level. This is even truer of a union. The national union oversees national operations, but the Local Union assists professionals who want to organize, assists organized bargaining units in bargaining, and helps to track and administer contacts. Decisions regarding local issues are made by the grassroots membership at the local level and not dictated from on high.



What is a union security clause?

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. Ultimately, the members decide whether or not this protection is part of their collective bargaining agreement.

Why are unions so involved in politics?

Today's unions help professionals make their voices heard in their communities and across the country. In communities, unions promote local economic development, jobs with living wages, and public concerns—from better schools to public health to clean air and water. Through unions, America's workers are able to help their neighbors by providing community services and disaster relief.

At the state and national levels, unions are one of the few 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, and Medicare and Medicaid.

Unions help working people stand up and be heard. Unions listen to members about their concerns, inform members about current issues, and let members know whether their public officials are helping or hurting working people. Through unions, professionals are able to make their voices heard on the issues that matter most.

For more information on professional workers, check the DPE website: www.dpeaflcio.org.

The Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO (DPE) comprises 22 AFL-CIO unions representing over four million people working in professional, technical and administrative support occupations. DPE-affiliated unions represent: teachers, college professors, and school administrators; library workers; nurses, doctors, and other health care professionals; engineers, scientists, and IT workers; journalists and writers, broadcast technicians and communications specialists; performing and visual artists; professional athletes; professional firefighters; psychologists, social workers, and many others. DPE was chartered by the AFL-CIO in 1977 in recognition of the rapidly growing professional and technical occupations.



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March 2015

