
THE UNION DIFFERENCE FOR WORKING PROFESSIONALS

Highlights

- Over six million union members working in professional occupations have better pay, benefits, and working conditions because they collectively bargain with their employers.
- Union membership continues to narrow the gender pay gap for professional women.
- In response to the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, union professionals have been able to negotiate for improved health and safety standards, financial assistance for extended work-from-home arrangements, and a say in how vaccine requirements and office re-openings are implemented.

What is Collective Bargaining?

Working professionals have the right to join together with their colleagues to form unions and negotiate with their employers on important workplace issues. Through the process of collective bargaining, employees are able to develop a binding contract that guarantees specific salaries, benefits, and other conditions of employment, just like the contracts that many CEOs have.

Over six million professionals benefit from collective bargaining agreements that protect their pay, benefits and working conditions, including doctors, nurses, lawyers, teachers, professors, research scientists, engineers, performers, technicians, administrative professionals, and many more in hundreds of other occupations.¹ No two union contracts are exactly alike, as professionals customize their collective bargaining agreements to meet their specific occupational needs and the context of their employers.

Joining together in union and negotiating with their employers allows professionals to speak with a collective voice that is stronger than any one person could hope to have. As a result, professionals who are union members are also able to have a greater role in shaping legislation and policy that impacts them and their industries.

Wages and Benefits

Through union membership and collective bargaining, professionals are able to negotiate over how wages are set and what benefits are provided to employees. Many collective bargaining agreements set guaranteed minimum salaries for various positions, as well as minimum annual pay increases. Individual employees are then free to negotiate for a higher salary based on individual performance, past experience, or other factors. For many professionals, union membership can make the difference between living paycheck to paycheck and earning enough to support their families.

- Many writers, editors, and podcast producers have won wage increases and guaranteed minimums through their collective bargaining agreements as part of the Writers Guild of

America, East (WGAE). For example, in their first contract ratified with Spotify in April 2021, writers, editors and other professionals at The Ringer established an entry-level salary floor of \$57,000 plus overtime. Additionally, the producers, reporters, and other professionals at Gimlet Media established a floor of \$73,000 for associate producers in their first contract, also ratified in April 2021. Both contracts also established annual minimum raises of at least 2 percent.²

- In April 2021, medical techs and therapists at St. Charles Medical Center in Bend, Oregon, ratified their first union contract after voting to unionize in 2019. These members of the Oregon Federation of Nurses and Health Professionals, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), won average wage increases of 25 percent over three years and were able to establish a new wage system to fix long-standing inequities in pay.³
- Many professionals who work at non-profit organizations have organized new unions in recent years, in part to raise salaries and ensure that positions at their mission-driven organizations are accessible to all. Members of the Nonprofit Professional Employees Union (NPEU), International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) Local 70, who work at the research and advocacy organization Every Texan ratified their first contract in August 2021, winning a \$15,000 increase to base salaries, a new monthly student loan repayment stipend of up to \$200 per month, 16 weeks of paid parental leave, and 12 weeks of paid family and medical leave.⁴
- Across many professional occupations, professionals who are union members earn significantly more than their non-union colleagues.

Average yearly wage and salary earnings for union and non-union professionals working full-time in selected occupations, 2020⁵		
Occupation	Union member annual earnings	Non-union annual earnings
Secondary School Teachers	\$69,057	\$46,274
Registered Nurses	\$74,578	\$67,326
Budget Analysts	\$97,808	\$71,429
Child, Family and School Social Workers	\$49,547	\$40,112
Aerospace Engineers	\$128,797	\$95,256
Computer Support Specialists	\$113,851	\$90,020
Librarians	\$38,032	\$27,982

While it's easy to see the impact of union membership and collective bargaining on wages, the process of collective bargaining also helps professionals win substantially better benefits, including lower health insurance premiums and better quality plans, larger retirement contributions, and more paid sick days, paid vacation time, and paid parental leave.⁶ Union professionals can also bargain for other priorities including professional development funds, flexible working hours, and remote work opportunities.

Union Membership Narrows the Wage Gap

While the gender pay gap is shrinking at far too slow of a pace, female professionals who are union members earn an average salary that is much closer to male professional union members when compared to their non-union counterparts. In 2020, professional women in unions earned 81 cents per dollar compared to professional men in unions. Non-union professional women only earned 75 cents for every dollar earned by men working in professional occupations.⁷

Collective bargaining agreements help professionals narrow wage gaps by setting salary minimums and establishing clear criteria for how starting pay and subsequent raises should be calculated. Union professionals have also negotiated for their employers to conduct periodic pay equity studies and fix identified gaps. Employees of Thrillist Media won this kind of commitment in their second collective bargaining agreement, ratified in August 2021, which requires their employer to complete a pay equity survey within six months of contract ratification and share their results and methodology with the union. The contract also requires Thrillist to investigate and either rectify or explain pay differences of over 12 percent for employees in the same role.⁸

Addressing Workplace Concerns Through Collective Bargaining

Though salaries and benefits are often the top concern of professionals, union members address many other workplace issues through the collective bargaining process.

- Staffing levels and patient care are often big issues for nurses and other healthcare professionals. At McLaren Greater Lansing Hospital in Michigan, nurses who are members of Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPEIU) Local 459 have enshrined core staffing ratios into their collective bargaining agreement. The ratios vary based upon unit and shift and include a maximum of two patients per nurse in the critical care unit, as well as lump sum bonuses paid to affected staff in the event hospital management fails to meet staffing standards on a particular shift in a unit.⁹
- Large IT services companies that do third party contract work for U.S. corporations often move work overseas to cut costs, jeopardizing working standards for U.S. tech professionals. The Google contract workers employed by HCL America in Pittsburgh organized a union with the United Steelworkers (USW) in 2019. As part of their historic first contract ratified in July 2021, the software analysts were able to win language that protects their jobs from offshoring, negotiating for a required minimum number of bargaining unit positions that must be located in Pittsburgh and cannot be moved overseas.¹⁰
- In public education, many teachers are working to improve class sizes and get support services in schools for students. In Los Angeles, members of the United Teachers of Los Angeles, AFT Local 1021 won important gains to improve the quality of education and help students who may need extra support, including a guarantee of nurses in every school every day, a librarian in every secondary school every day, and a guaranteed ratio of one counselor for every 500 students in secondary schools. They also won important gains to start lowering class sizes.¹¹

Another way collective bargaining agreements address workplace concerns is through the creation of Labor-Management Committees (LMCs). LMCs generally are made up of an equal

number of union and management representatives, and are a venue for the union and the employer to discuss issues not specifically addressed in the contract. LMCs tend to be informal and protected settings where collaboration is valued and employee and employer concerns and ideas can be brought for resolution and feedback.

Making Industries More Inclusive

In many industries, professionals and their unions have prioritized increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion in the workplace by negotiating for workplace policies meant to disrupt past hiring practices and prevent discrimination in the workplace.

- To address disparities in pay, AFT members at Rutgers University negotiated for a process to allow faculty members to apply for equity adjustments in order to address pay disparities based on race, ethnic identity, gender, or other protected categories.¹²
- Editorial staff at multiple outlets represented by the WGAE, including *Gizmodo*, *HuffPost*, and *Slate* have included provisions in their collective bargaining agreements to increase diversity in the newsroom. This includes a union-backed diversity committee that management is required to meet with regularly and a commitment to interviewing diverse candidates for open positions.¹³
- Screen Actors Guild - American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) members who work in public radio have also made increasing diversity, equity, and inclusion a priority in bargaining. At WHYY in Philadelphia, union members negotiated for a first union contract that includes a process for creating a joint union-management committee that will not only be concerned with the development of a more diverse and equitable workforce, but also promoting equity in the way that the station engages with, covers and provides programming to the broader community.
- Members of the Engineers and Scientists of California, IFPTE Local 20, working at the Centro Legal de la Raza bargained for the establishment of a diversity committee made up of union members and managers. The role of the committee is to participate in job interviews for open positions and exit interviews for departing staff, as well as to plan trainings and other events that advance the goal of recruiting, hiring and retention of a diverse staff and incubating leadership among staff members.¹⁴
- Unfortunately, the essential work of creating more diverse and welcoming workplaces often falls to professionals as a secondary task in addition to their primary work responsibilities, without additional compensation. At the University of Michigan, graduate student workers who are members of AFT negotiated for the creation of dedicated, fully-paid positions for graduate employees to advance the union's and university's shared diversity, equity and inclusion goals.¹⁵

Pushing Back Against Insecure Work Arrangements

Approximately 2.3 million professionals report that they do not expect their jobs to last or that their jobs are temporary.¹⁶ However, through their unions, professionals have been pushing back against efforts to outsource work to contractors, and to turn careers into temporary or contingent work arrangements.

- In April 2020, the Tennessee Valley Authority announced that it would be outsourcing internal software development work to several third party companies and laying off more than 200 TVA employees in the process.¹⁷ The union that represents these professionals, IFPTE Local 1937, quickly jumped into action, rallying support for the restoration of these positions and opposition to the outsourcing plan, which would have required union members to train their replacements and help facilitate the offshoring of this work to other countries. Thanks to the actions of union members and leaders, their case rose in prominence, attracting enough attention to prompt the White House to act and reverse the outsourcing plan.¹⁸
- The TVA’s original plan mirrors a trend where corporations, in their quest to boost profits, regularly replace American professionals with H-1B guest workers, often as an intermediate step before offshoring the work entirely. H-1B workers are typically paid below market wages. Additionally, employers control their visas and, therefore, their ability to live and work in the United States, which means H-1B workers are unlikely to speak up about poor working conditions or cooperate with authorities after a complaint has been filed. Engineers and other professionals in IFPTE have been working to reform the H-1B program to protect American professionals and the people working on H-1B visas, and to end the incentive that exists for corporations to use guest worker programs as a way to cut costs and lower industry standards.¹⁹
- At colleges and universities across the country, the rise of part-time, “adjunct” faculty has cut into the traditional roles that faculty have played in research, student mentoring, and school administration. Several unions, including AFT and USW, have been working with adjunct faculty members to win important gains that bring more stability to their lives, including higher per-class rates of pay and the assurance of continued employment semester-to-semester.²⁰
- Working on political campaigns is notoriously unstable, and field organizers and other campaign professionals are often required to work long hours for low pay and with very little job security. However, in recent years, the employees of many individual candidates and state parties have begun to organize unions and negotiate collective bargaining agreements. Many of these new union members have joined the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), and their contracts are setting new standards for campaign professionals, including paid vacations, holidays, overtime, and pay transparency.²¹
- In journalism and digital media, the practice of hiring “permalancers” has taken hold among publishers. These professionals are hired on a full-time, temporary basis without any of the benefits provided to full-time staff, but are expected to work under the same conditions as a traditional full-time position. While labor law prohibits many freelancers from joining established unions, members of the WGAE are still working in solidarity with freelance writers. The collective bargaining agreement for staff at VICE News, for example, includes language that mandates management offer a permanent staff position to any freelancer who works at least 228 days in any 12-month period.²²

Protecting Professionals During the COVID-19 Pandemic

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the United States and across the world, the way professionals work was immediately changed. For some, pandemic protocols meant working from home, other professionals in essential industries continued to perform their duties in-person but with new concerns about health and safety, and others were put out of work entirely due to the temporary pause of live events and performances. Faced with this situation, professionals and their unions were able to negotiate solutions to mitigate the impact of these changes.

- For many professionals, COVID-19 led to a transition of working from home. However, many federal government employees had to continue working with the public in order to continue providing essential services. Early in the pandemic, as cases were still low in the United States, the union representing Transportation Security Officers, the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), started advocating for the rights of TSOs to wear N95 respiratory masks to protect against airborne viral transmission. Initially, this request was denied by the TSA administrator, David Pekoske, because he did not want to alarm the public. But as AFGE ramped up their pressure and the threat of COVID-19 became more apparent, Administrator Pekoske and the Trump administration finally agreed.
- For those working in healthcare, such as the nurses and other professionals represented by AFT affiliate Health Professionals and Allied Employees (HPAE) in New Jersey, the pandemic has resulted in one crisis after another. A compounding factor was the lack of clear standards and enforcement from the Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA). To force both OSHA and healthcare employers to do the right thing and prioritize the safety of healthcare professionals, members of HPAE and other AFT affiliate unions filed many complaints with OSHA, state, and local health departments, resulting in citations and fines against many employers. OSHA eventually conducted 25 investigations, and many of the facilities that were cited improved their safety practices, providing more training, better personal protective equipment, and medical evaluations for staff.²³
- As it became clear that live events such as dance performances would not resume for many months, the dancers and stage managers represented by the American Guild of Musical Artists (AGMA) at the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater were able to negotiate for a memorandum of understanding (MOU) to protect their pay and benefits, including health insurance, during the 2020-2021 season. The MOU also provided for a process to negotiate over alternative work assignments not normally performed by the artists.²⁴
- After television and film productions were shut down completely for the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, SAG-AFTRA, International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE), Directors Guild of America (DGA), and other production unions worked with leading studios in order to negotiate safety and health standards that would allow work to resume, which were then codified into contract language. These standards included testing, paid leave, protective personal equipment (PPE), social distancing on sets, and designated coronavirus safety officers. These standards have allowed film and television production to resume safely, detecting potential exposures early, and preventing large-scale outbreaks on sets.²⁵
- In the non-profit sector, members of the NPEU, IFPTE Local 70, have been negotiating agreements to help professionals adapt to the long term reality of work-from-home. At

the National Women’s Law Center, union members were able to secure both lump-sum and recurring stipends to help cover the increased costs associated with working from home, contract extensions for term-limited staff whose positions were set to end in the middle of the economic downturn, and policies to ensure that employees and their union will have a role in office reopening decisions.²⁶

- Many professionals have worked through their unions to make it easier for their coworkers to get vaccinated against COVID-19. At Augsburg University in Minnesota, OPEIU members negotiated an agreement that provides an additional 16 hours of paid sick leave for staff who get vaccinated, in order to have adequate time off to receive their dose(s) and recover from any side effects.

Millions of professionals have chosen to come together in union and negotiate collectively for better wages and benefits, for a say in important workplace decisions, and to improve the quality of their work and the industries they work in. It is important to note that no two collective bargaining agreements are the same. The type of workplace improvements addressed by a collective bargaining agreement is determined by the members who will be covered by the contract and their employer. Uniquely tailored collective bargaining agreements have resulted in the wide range of contract provisions covered in this fact sheet.

For answers to common questions about unions for professionals, see “[I’m a Professional. What can a Union do for Me?](#)”

For more information on professional workers or for more information on how to gain collective bargaining in your workplace, check the DPE website: www.dpeaflcio.org

The Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO (DPE) comprises 24 national unions representing over four million people working in professional and technical occupations. DPE’s affiliates represent teachers, physicians, engineers, computer scientists, psychologists, nurses, university professors, actors, technicians, and others in more than 200 professional occupations.

Source: DPE Research Department
815 Black Lives Matter Plz NW, 6th Floor
Washington, DC 20006

Contact: Ethan Miller
(202) 638-0320 extension 14
emiller@dpeaflcio.org

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¹ For the purposes of this factsheet, professional occupations include all occupations that fall under the following major groups in the 2018 standard occupational classification system: management occupations, business and financial operations occupations, computer and mathematical occupations, architecture and engineering occupations, life, physical, and social science occupations, community and social service occupations, legal, educational instruction and library occupations, arts, design, entertainment, sports, and media occupations, and healthcare practitioners and technical occupations.

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⁴ Nonprofit Professional Employees Union. “Every Texan Ratifies Union Agreement, First NPEU Contract in Texas and Any Right-to-Work State.” August 16, 2021. <https://npeu.org/news/2021/8/16/every-texan-ratifies-union-agreement-first-npeu-contract>

⁵ Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement. March 2020.

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⁷ Department for Professional Employees analysis of Current Population Survey data for 2020.

⁸ Writers Guild of America, East. “Thrillist Ratifies Second Union Contract with Group Nine Media.” August 3, 2021. <https://www.wgaeast.org/thrillist-ratifies-second-union-contract-with-group-nine-media/>

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¹³ Writers Guild of America, East. “Staff Contracts.” <https://www.wgaeast.org/guild-contracts/staff-contracts/>

¹⁴ Engineers and Scientists of California Local 20, IFPTE. “Centro Legal de la Raza: 2019 Tentative Agreement.” <https://www.ifpte20.org/centro-2019-ta/>

¹⁵ American Federation of Teachers. “Grad employee union wins full pay for diversity work.” September 6, 2017. <https://www.aft.org/news/grad-employee-union-wins-full-pay-diversity-work>

¹⁶ Bureau of Labor Statistics. Table 4. Employed contingent and noncontingent workers by occupation and industry, May 2017. June 7, 2018. <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/conemp.t04.htm>

¹⁷ Cohen, Rachel. “Despite Skyrocketing Unemployment, Tennessee Valley Authority Plans to Outsource Hundreds of Federal Jobs to Overseas Companies.” The Intercept. May 5, 2020. <https://theintercept.com/2020/05/05/tennessee-valley-authority-outsource-jobs-unemployment/>

¹⁸ International Federation of Professional and Technical Employees. “Statement by Leaders of IFPTE on President Trump’s Executive Order Regarding TVA.” August 3, 2020. <https://www.ifpte.org/news/statement-by-leaders-of-ifpte-on-president-trumps-executive-order-regarding-tva>

¹⁹ Department for Professional Employees “Guest worker visas: The H-1B and L-1.” April 30, 2021 <https://dpeaficio.org/programs-publications/issue-fact-sheets/guest-worker-visas-the-h-1b-and-l-1/>

²⁰ American Federation of Teachers. “Report shows alarming poverty among adjunct faculty.” April 21, 2020. <https://www.aft.org/news/report-shows-alarming-poverty-among-adjunct-faculty>

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²⁴ American Guild of Musical Artists and Alvin Ailey Dance Foundation, Inc. “Memorandum of Agreement.” September 2020.

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