



# 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 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 colleagues oversee carrying out the provisions of the contract.

---

## Why would professionals want or need a union?

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

Many professional employees lack control of their work lives. In non-union environments, most decisions concerning wages, benefits, and working conditions rest solely with 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?**

Over six million doctors, lawyers, pharmacists, professors, news reporters, broadcasters, actors, engineers, accountants, school teachers, nurses, and people in nearly every other profession were union members in 2017. These skilled and highly trained professionals chose to work together through their unions to gain a voice in decisions that affect them and improve their workplace. Nothing could be more professional.

---

## **How effective are unions at improving wages and benefits?**

Women and men who are represented by unions bring home more money than non-union employees. This “union advantage” — more money in union members’ paychecks — exists in almost every occupation, from service and factory workers to clerical and professional employees. The union advantage is possible because employees have more bargaining power when they join together.

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 2017, 95 percent of union members had access to an employer-provided health care plan, compared with only 67 percent of non-union employees.
- Union members are far less likely to have to choose between caring for their health and losing their jobs. Eighty-seven percent of union members have paid sick leave, compared to only 69 percent of non-union workers.
- On retirement benefits, union members are much more likely to enjoy a secure retirement. Eighty-three percent of union members participate in a retirement plan, while only 49 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.

Any changes to the collectively bargained benefits will be a subject of bargaining.

*Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, National Compensation Survey, March 2017.*

---

**What about job security — do unions make a difference?**

Unions protect employees 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.

---

**What can a union do 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. With today's unions, professionals have a better chance to improve their pay and achieve work-life balance.

---

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

With collective bargaining, management and the employees must agree on the mechanisms to be used and standards to be employed in determining pay and promotions. Professionals may bargain for any viable wage and promotion system they believe best suits their profession and employment, including minimum salaries, cost of living increases, performance increases, bonuses, and merit pay.

---

**Would having a union mean that poorly performing employees have more protections?**

Union representation does not prevent management from disciplining or terminating poorly performing employees. Union representation only requires that management follow procedures outlined in the collective bargaining agreement pertaining to employee discipline or termination—procedures that management agreed to. Discipline and termination provisions exist solely to prevent arbitrary and unfair treatment by management.

No one benefits from poorly performing employees in the workplace, especially their colleagues.

---

**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, just as there are no guarantees that you will agree with everything contained in the employee handbook. However, there are ways to ensure the union contract is serving members. First, a contract must be approved by a majority vote of the union members in the bargaining unit. Second, the union officers who negotiate the contracts that are voted upon by members are elected by the members they serve, with elections happening at least every three years.

---

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

No and in fact you have more rights. In a non-union workplace, management retains the legal right to make all decisions regarding the workplace. Benefits — including pay, pensions, healthcare, 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.

---

**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 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.

---

**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. The vast majority of contracts between professionals and management are negotiated civilly and professionally. Labor-management cooperation is the norm and many successful examples exist. For example, national unions representing 150,000 front-line caregivers in 31 union locals bargained collectively with Kaiser Permanente, one of the nation's largest healthcare providers. Their agreement gives front-line healthcare workers a greater voice in the crucial decisions affecting the quality of patient care at Kaiser facilities.

---

### **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.

If you work in the private sector — and increasingly in the nonprofit 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?

---

### **Are unions democratic?**

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 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’s 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.

---

---

## How does a union's involvement in politics benefit me?

Today's unions help professionals make their voices heard in their communities and across the country. Through their unions, professionals are able to speak with a unified voice in Washington, D.C. and state and local government, so they can influence issues and legislation that impact their industry and profession.

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.

---

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

For more information on professional employees, check the DPE website: [www.dpeaflcio.org](http://www.dpeaflcio.org).

*The Department for Professional Employees, AFL-CIO (DPE) comprises 23 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 technology professionals; 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.*

Source: DPE Research Department  
815 16th Street, N.W., 7th Floor  
Washington, DC 20006

Contact: [info@dpeaflcio.org](mailto:info@dpeaflcio.org)

February 2018

