THE UNION DIFFERENCE FOR WORKING PROFESSIONALS

Working professionals have the right to join together with their colleagues to form a union and negotiate with their employer 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 use collective bargaining to negotiate for better pay, benefits and working conditions, including doctors, nurses, teachers, professors, research scientists, engineers, performers, technicians, administrative personnel and many more in countless 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 employer allows professionals to speak together with a collective voice that is stronger than any one person could hope to have. As a result, professionals who are union members are better positioned than non-union professionals in a number of arenas, outlined in this fact sheet.

Wages and Benefits

Through union membership and collective bargaining, professionals gain a voice in the way that wages and salaries are set. 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 earning enough to support their families and living paycheck to paycheck.

- In Los Angeles, public school teachers who are members of the United Teachers of Los Angeles and the American Federation of Teachers won a six percent salary increase as part of their groundbreaking 2019-2022 collective bargaining agreement in January 2019.²

- Writers and editors at various online outlets have won wage increases and guaranteed minimums through their collective bargaining agreements as part of the Writers Guild of America, East. For example, in their October 2018 first contract, the editorial staff at Thrillist won a $50,000 wage floor, as well as a guaranteed 8.5 percent raise in the first year of the contract and 2.5 percent raises in the second and third years.³

- Philadelphia Orchestra players who are members of the American Federation of Musicians were able to win yearly pay increases over the length of the four year contract
they signed in March 2019. The contract also includes a provision for extra income if the orchestra achieves certain fundraising benchmarks and expands the size of the orchestra.⁴

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Union member weekly earnings</th>
<th>Non-union weekly earnings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secondary School Teachers</td>
<td>$1346</td>
<td>$981</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Registered Nurses</td>
<td>$1623</td>
<td>$1257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Workers</td>
<td>$1090</td>
<td>$888</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aerospace Engineers</td>
<td>$3226</td>
<td>$2516</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Librarians</td>
<td>$1034</td>
<td>$717</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Broadcast and sound engineering technicians</td>
<td>$2047</td>
<td>$1274</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While it’s easier 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, more sick days, paid vacation and paid family leave. Depending on their priorities, union professionals can also bargain for professional development funds, flexible working hours, and telework opportunities.

**Union Membership Narrows the Wage Gap**

While the gender pay gap is shrinking at far too slow of a pace, women who are union members earn an average salary much closer to male union members than non-unionized women and men. Women in unions are paid 94 cents for every dollar paid to men in unions, while women who are not union members only earn 78 cents for every dollar earned by men not in unions.⁶

This extends to professional women as well, who face a larger wage gap than women working in other occupations. Professional women who are not union members only earn 73 cents for every dollar earned by men working in professional occupations, while professional women in unions earn an additional 10% (83 cents per dollar) when compared to professional men in unions.⁷

**Addressing Workplace Concerns through Collective Bargaining**

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

- Staffing levels and patient care are often big issues for nurses and other healthcare professionals. Registered nurses at Munson Medical Center in Traverse City, Michigan ratified their first collective bargaining agreement in March 2019 with the Michigan Nurses Association, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers. The contract
limits forced overtime, provides a formal structure to address nurse staffing levels, and puts into place new safety procedures to increase the quality of patient care.  

- In the tumultuous world of digital media, layoffs and reorganizations have become all too common, making strong severance packages a bargaining priority for many media professionals. However, sometimes layoffs are announced after a union has been formed but before a first contract is in place. This was the situation at Vox media in February of 2018, when the sudden announcement of layoffs prompted Vox union’s negotiating committee, part of the Writers’ Guild of America, East, to jump into action, successfully winning a severance package just a few months after the union won voluntary recognition from management.

- In public education, many teachers are working to improve class sizes and get support services in schools for students. In Los Angeles, UTLA members 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.

Another way collective bargaining agreements address workplace concerns is through the creation of Labor-Management Committees (LMCs). LMCs are made up of an equal number of union and management representatives, and are a venue for the union and the employer to raise concerns about issues not specifically addressed in the contract. An employee raising a concern can usually do so anonymously through a union representative. 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

Professionals have made increasing diversity in the workforce a priority and, as a result, have incorporated policies meant to increase diversity and prevent discrimination into their collective bargaining agreements.

- Those in the entertainment industry, for example, want to make sure productions on stage and screen reflect the population at-large and provide opportunities for all performers. Actors’ Equity Association, the union for theater actors and stage managers, recently published a report finding that women and minority actors were getting fewer roles and were paid less than white male actors. And SAG-AFTRA contracts help ensure reasonable accommodations for performers who are blind or visually impaired, providing that “Producers and performer shall make mutually acceptable provisions to make the script available to the performer in advance of auditions.”

- Editorial staff at multiple outlets, 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.

- The International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW) is committed to increasing diversity within the ranks of its membership. Through apprenticeship programs and other
initiatives, IBEW is recruiting and welcoming women and people of color into the ranks of professional electricians and technicians in a variety of industries, including construction, telecommunications and broadcasting.\textsuperscript{13}

Pushing Back Against Insecure Work Arrangements

Approximately 1.2 million professionals report that they do not expect their jobs to last or that their jobs are temporary.\textsuperscript{14} However, through their unions, professionals have been pushing back against temporary and other forms of contingent work that have proliferated over the last two decades.

- 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. Many unions, including the American Federation of Teachers and the United Steelworkers, 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.

- For many members of the International Association of Theatrical and Stage Employees (IATSE), freelancing has always been a part of the job. But in Georgia, stagehands and other technical professionals at the Lakewood Amphitheater found that they were being misclassified as independent contractors by a Live Nation subcontractor. After a few years of court cases, they were able to organize with IATSE and win a contract directly with Live Nation, raising wages and implementing important health and safety training.\textsuperscript{15}

- In journalism and digital media, the practice 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 Writers Guild of America, East 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.\textsuperscript{16}

- Corporations, in their quest to cut costs and boost profits, regularly replace American professionals with guest workers on visas such as the H-1B. Guest workers in these programs are easily exploited as they are typically paid below market wages and do not have the ability to apply for another job. Additionally, employers control their visas and work permits, which means most guest 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 the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE) have been working to reform these visa programs to protect both guest workers and American employees and ensure corporations do not have an incentive to use these programs to undercut American professionals and exploit guest workers.\textsuperscript{17}
A Voice for Professionalism

Through their unions, professionals are able to use their collective voice to stand up for professional standards and the future of good jobs in their respective industries.

- In the wake of sexual harassment and assault allegations that rocked the entertainment industry, creative professionals in a variety of occupations launched a new initiative to combat sexual harassment and share best practices across professions. Through their unions, they committed to working together to make industry-wide improvements and collaborate on new ways to help eliminate harassment from the workplace.

- During the partial shutdown of the Federal government in December 2018 and January 2019, 800,000 federal employees and many more federal contract workers were furloughed and did not receive pay for 35 days. Unions representing federal employees and contractors, including the American Federation of Government Employees, International Association of Machinists, Professional Aviation Safety Specialists, and IFPTE, were able to raise their collective voices and mobilize to urge congress to end the shutdown and provide backpay to federal employees. As of April 2019, federal contractors were still working to pass legislation to win backpay for themselves.

- Teachers, administrators and other educational professionals use their collective voices to uphold professional standards inside the classroom and make sure students are properly supported outside the classroom as well. Both AFT and the American Federation of School Administrators (AFSA) have taken strong stances to advocate for the rights of immigrant children with temporary DACA protection, for greater gun control and against arming teachers and other school personnel, and against diverting funds meant for public education to private schools.

Collective bargaining has allowed over six million professionals to come together to achieve workplace improvements. The type of workplace improvements addressed by a collective bargaining agreement is determined solely by the members who will be covered by the collective bargaining agreement. Uniquely tailored collective bargaining agreements have resulted in the wide range of contract provisions covered in this fact sheet.

As demonstrated in this fact sheet, 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 professional nature of their jobs.

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.

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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.


10 United Teachers of Los Angeles. (2019).


18 The twelve unions committing to joint action against sexual harassment in the entertainment industry include: Actors’ Equity Association, American Federation of Musicians, American Guild of Musical Artists, American Guild of Variety Artists, Directors Guild of America, Guild of Italian American Artists, International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, Moving Picture Technicians, Artists and Allied Crafts, International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers, Office and Professional Employees International Union, SAG-AFTRA, Stage Directors and Choreographers Society, and Writers Guild of America, East.

