

Unions 101:

A Quick Study of How Unions Help Workers Win a Voice on the Job

What is a union?

A union is a group of workers who forms an organization to gain:

- Respect on the job;
- Better wages and benefits;
- More flexibility for work and family needs;
- A counterbalance to the unchecked power of employers;
- A voice in improving the quality of their products and services.

How do people form a union?

When workers decide they want to come together to improve their jobs, they work with a union to help them form their own local chapter. After a majority of workers shows they want a union, employers sometimes honor the workers' choice. Often, the workers must ask the government (through the National Labor Relations Board) to hold an election. If the workers win their union, they negotiate a contract with the employer that spells out each party's rights and responsibilities in the workplace.

Does the law protect workers joining unions?

It's supposed to—but too often it doesn't. Under the law, employers are not allowed to discriminate against or fire workers for choosing to join a union. For example, it's illegal for employers to threaten to shut down their businesses, fire employees or take away benefits if workers form a union. However, employers routinely violate these laws, and the penalties are weak or nonexistent.

What kinds of workers are forming unions today?

A wider range of people than ever before, including many women and immigrants, is joining unions: doctors, nurses, poultry workers, graduate employees, home health care aides, wireless communications workers, auto parts workers and engineers, to name a few.

How do unions help working families today?

Through unions, workers win better wages, benefits and a voice on the job—and good union jobs mean stronger communities. Union workers earn 26 percent more than nonunion workers and are more likely to receive health care and pension benefits than those without a union. In 2002, median weekly earnings for full-time union wage and salary workers were \$740, compared with \$587 for their nonunion counterparts. Unions lead the fight today for better lives for working people, such as through expanded family and medical leave, improved safety and health protections and fair-trade agreements that lift the standard of living for workers all over the world.

What have unions accomplished for all workers?

Unions have made life better for all of America's workers by helping to pass laws ending child labor, establishing the eight-hour day, protecting workers' safety and health and helping create Social Security, unemployment insurance and the minimum wage. Unions are continuing the fight today to improve life for all working families in America.

- Union members earn 26 percent more than their nonunion counterparts.
- More than 75 percent of union workers have health benefits. Less than half of nonunion workers have health coverage.
- Nearly 70 percent of union workers have a pension. Only 14 percent of nonunion workers have one.
- The 10 states where unions are strongest have higher earnings, better health coverage, less crime, more civic participation, less poverty and better schools than the 10 states where union membership is lowest.
- That is why more and more of America's workers want union jobs or want a union where they work. More than 42 million nonunion workers say they want to join a union. However, employers often harass and intimidate workers when they join together to form their union. That is wrong, often illegal and most definitely a violation of the human rights of those workers. Independent research shows that,
- 25 percent of employers illegally fire at least one worker for union activity during organizing campaigns.
- 75 percent of employers hire union-busters to fight union organizing.
- 78 percent of employers force employees to attend one-on-one meetings with their own supervisors against the union.
- 52 percent of employers threaten to call the Immigration and Naturalization Service during organizing that includes undocumented workers.
- 51 percent of companies threaten to close the plant if the union wins the

election, however, less than 1 percent ever actually do that.

What challenges do workers face today when they want to form unions?

Today, millions of workers want to join unions. The wisest employers understand when workers form unions, their companies also benefit. But most employers fight workers' efforts for a stronger voice at the workplace by intimidating, harassing and threatening them. In response, workers are reaching out to their communities for help exercising their freedom to improve their lives.

Why Workers Want Unions

Stories of employer intimidation and coercion provide a glimpse into the results of employers' relentless attacks against workers' right to form a union. The results when workers prevail are much different.

Workers and their allies fight courageously to form unions because they know joining together and bargaining with their employer is the only way they can win what millions of union members already have: the wages, benefits and respect they deserve.

For home care worker Rosie Byers, having a union means time to spend with her family. Ronnie Pruitt, a construction worker, earns nearly twice as much money now that he has a union. And Fernando Villanueva's wife and children no longer have to share a small apartment with another family.

In February, the AFL-CIO Executive Council passed a resolution to "launch an unprecedented, unified campaign to...radically change the climate for organizing," by educating, engaging and mobilizing millions of union members and people of conscience. Union activists are spreading the word about the difference a union contract makes.

"When union members connect with nonunion workers, we win elections," says Douglas Dority, president of United Food and Commercial Workers and chair of the AFL-CIO Executive Council's Committee on Organizing. "When union members connect with politicians, we'll change the law and get real protections."