



Why UNIONS MATTER

Many people of faith and good will want to support low-wage workers in their efforts to improve wages, benefits, and working conditions, but they don't understand why workers want to be represented by unions. Young people especially may not even understand what a union is and why many workers are interested in forming unions.

As an organization committed to worker justice, the National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice believes that all workers should have the right to form a union without fear and harassment. In addition, the organization believes that in general unions are good for society. This does not mean that every union is perfect nor that every workplace needs a union. But for those concerned about justice for workers, it is important to understand why many workers want to join unions, the union benefit for workers, the role of unions in the society, and the difficulties workers face in forming unions. And, it is important to build relationships with labor unions to jointly fight for shared values of justice and dignity for workers, and to uphold the rights of workers who choose to form unions.

Why workers join or organize unions

My shifts kept changing and I couldn't rearrange child care fast enough. Whenever I talked with my supervisor, I was ignored.

I'd been with the company for twelve years and still was considered a "temporary" worker with no benefits.

We had no consistent personnel policies. People were fired and there were no grievance procedures. New people were hired and given more vacation days than others. Everything was based on who the supervisors liked.

I wanted a voice in the workplace – a way for the management to listen to me.

Several of my colleagues had been injured on the job. We suggested precautionary changes in procedures, but were ignored. We needed protection.

Workers say these and many other things about why they want to form unions. Every group of workers and every workplace is different, but these are some common reasons expressed.

Workers want a voice in decisions

All workers want to be involved in decisions that affect their lives, and yet many workers find themselves and their suggestions routinely ignored and rejected. Too many workers feel that they are denied their basic rights to talk and think when they enter the workplace. The management, which controls their basic livelihood, discourages workers' participation in the efforts of the company. This is especially frustrating to workers regarding issues such as scheduling of hours, workloads, the care of patients, staff-patient/ student ratios, and ways to make the work more effective.

Workers want a safe working environment.

At Avondale Industries Shipyard in New Orleans, for example, there is an average of 1,000 reportable injuries each year, and thirty workers have died building ships, according to the New Orleans Metal Trades Dept. In part because of the high rate of injuries, the workers decided to organize.

Because there are so many dangerous jobs, and many companies place a low value on protecting their workers, workers form unions to protect themselves. Farmworkers form unions to reduce their exposure to pesticides, and to get drinking water and bathrooms in the fields. Nursing home workers form unions to combat back injuries, frequently caused by chronic understaffing in nursing homes. Poultry workers form unions to address repetitive motion problems that plague the industry.

Workers want living wages.

Although wages are frequently *not* one of the first reasons cited by workers forming a union, adequate pay is a reflection of the value a company places on its workers. Workers need good wages to meet their families' needs and live with dignity. All families should be able to feed, clothe, and house their families on their wages, without having to turn to soup kitchens and shelters. Too many workers are still forced to turn to this emergency help. Families should have adequate income to provide for their children's education as well as their own retirement years. Union wages improve and strengthen working families' communities.

Workers want comprehensive benefits.

Unless (or until) the United States provides comprehensive health care to all residents, workers must turn to the places of employment to provide health insurance. Unfortunately, 43 million people are without health insurance coverage. Most of these uninsured are low-wage workers and their family members. Over half of all nursing-home workers are without health insurance because it is not offered at their workplace or the co-payments are too high. Unions place a high priority on securing health insurance coverage for workers.

Workers want and deserve other benefits, such as paid vacation, paid holidays, and good secure pensions. These are benefits for which unions advocate. Although there are non-unionized workplaces that offer good benefits, in industries that require limited amounts of training, a union is often the difference between having or not having benefits.

Workers want job security.

As companies outsource, downsize, and shift from permanent to contingent workers, workers are concerned about their job security. People want assurance that companies won't shift their job to a cheaper outsourced group, another state, or even another country. Unions can't guarantee job security, but contracts negotiated by unions attempt to build in some security for jobs, or severance benefits if jobs are reduced.

Workers want fairness in the workplace.

Workers want to know what the rules are, what the consequences are for breaking the rules, and the appeal (grievance) process if there is a disagreement. Some personnel policies clearly outline the rules, consequences and grievance procedures. Most don't. Too often the policies require the workers to follow the policies but the employers do not.

Without a personnel policy that acts as a contract (binding) or a union contract that makes the rules and procedures clear, workers feel that they are at the whim of supervisors. Promotions, raises, penalties, and dismissals often feel random and unfair.

What is the union "benefit"?

Unionized workers have a voice in the workplace.

Unions provide a counterbalancing power to management in the workplace, through a contract that outlines the rules and procedures, and through a structure for addressing workers' concerns. Workers can't always secure everything they want, but they are assured a more structured means for addressing problems.

Unionized workers earn more money and better benefits.

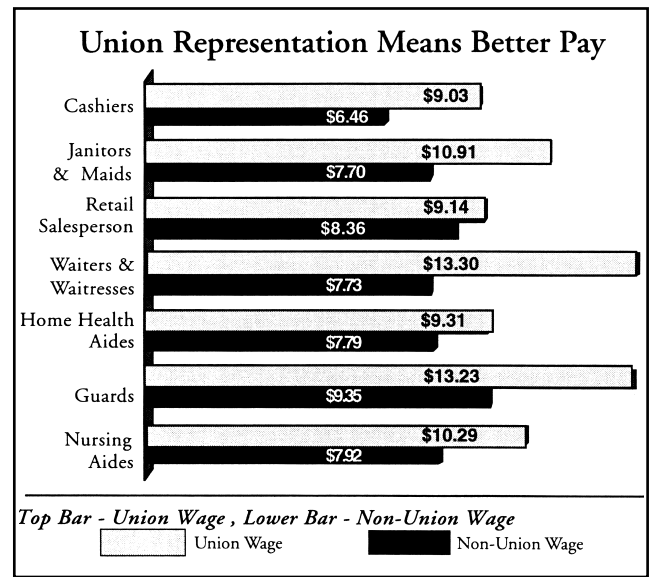
According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 1998 the union pay advantage was 32 percent higher for all workers, but it is even larger for African American and Latino workers. This wage differential is most clear in the seven fastest-growing low-wage occupations.

Unionized workers are more likely to have health insurance.

Union members are also more likely to have health plans that include dental, prescriptions, and eye glass coverage. In 1995, 85 percent of union workers in medium and large establishments had medical care benefits, compared with 74 percent of nonunion workers. Many unions are fighting to preserve or establish affordable co-payments for health insurance.

Unionized workers are more likely to have retirement benefits.

Most union members, 79 percent, have defined-benefit coverage plans, compared with only 44 percent of nonunion workers.



From *Working Hard, Earning Less: The Story of Job Growth in America*. National Priorities Project in collaboration with Jobs with Justice, December 1998.

What role do unions play in U.S. society?

Beyond the specific benefits unions offer individuals, it is important for those seeking justice in the society to understand and recognize the important role that unions have played in U.S. society at large.

Public Policy Advocates. Many union members have bumper stickers that say, "The eight-hour day, brought to you by the union movement." Well, it's true. Many of the public policies we take for granted, such as prohibitions on child labor, the eight-hour day, social security, pension protections, and minimum wage were fought for primarily by the labor movement. The religious community was often involved in these fights, primarily as allies with the labor movement.

As important as religious involvement is in public policy advocacy for low-wage workers, progress can be achieved more effectively in partnership with a strong labor movement. Workers, especially low-wage workers, need a strong public policy voice that can counteract the powerful, well-financed business interests that too often dominate public policies. Currently, unions are advocating increases in the minimum wage, health coverage for the 43 million uninsured Americans, protections for social security, stronger Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) enforcement, and expanded protections for immigrant workers.

Raising the Wage Floor for All Workers. Unions help create a floor for wages that benefits all workers, but especially low-wage workers. Between the mid-forties and the early-seventies, when labor unions were at their strongest, real wages rose consistently. Union members gain higher wages through collective bargaining, the process benefits all workers. Frequently

even non-union employers raise wages to dissuade workers from organizing and to retain good workers.

In 1954, unions represented 39 percent of the workforce. At the beginning of the 21st century, unions represent only ten percent of the private sector workforce. The decline of unions and their power is clearly a contributing cause to the overall decline of wages and benefits for all workers.

Challenging Gross Disparity of Wages. The ratio of CEO pay to worker pay in major U.S. companies is the most unequal of any industrialized nation in the world. CEO pay in the U.S. was 243 times the average worker pay in 1998, compared to ratios of 10 to 20 times in other industrialized countries. U.S. CEO salaries are so excessive, compared to their average workers' salaries, because of a culture of greed and the decline of unions.

Union bargaining tends not only to raise the bottom wages, but also to limit the growth of excessively high management wages, and to place some limits on CEO compensation. The effort to seek more equitable and just salaries within companies is best achieved by unions organized within companies.

What happens when workers want to form a union?



Workers talk with one another.

Workers don't usually know that they want a union. They just know they are unhappy about working conditions. Frequently, workers have sought to change conditions by talking with supervisors, participating in organized input groups, or filing formal complaints. Most workers who organize turn to unions only after they've tried other means for gaining a legitimate voice in the workplace.

Contact is made with a union.

The person who makes the initial contact with a union varies. Sometimes a worker knows a friend who knows someone in a union. Other times, workers contact the local labor council to find out which union should be contacted. In other settings, union organizers are out talking with workers in particular industries and come across workers who want to organize a union.

In past years, unions had clear sector priorities. The steelworkers organized workers in steel factories, the auto workers organized auto workers, and so forth. For a variety of reasons, it is no longer clear which union represents or organizes which workers. Thus, workers can approach a variety of unions and discuss which one would best represent the workers' interests.

Organizing committee is built.

Because most workers don't know what unions are or do, unions build an organizing committee to help educate workers on what unions do for them and for society at large. If there is not enough interest in even forming an organizing committee, it is probably not a place where workers will vote for a union.

Cards are signed.

In the U.S., the way workers indicate to companies that they would like to be represented by a union is by signing "an authorization card." This card authorizes the union to operate on the workers' behalf.

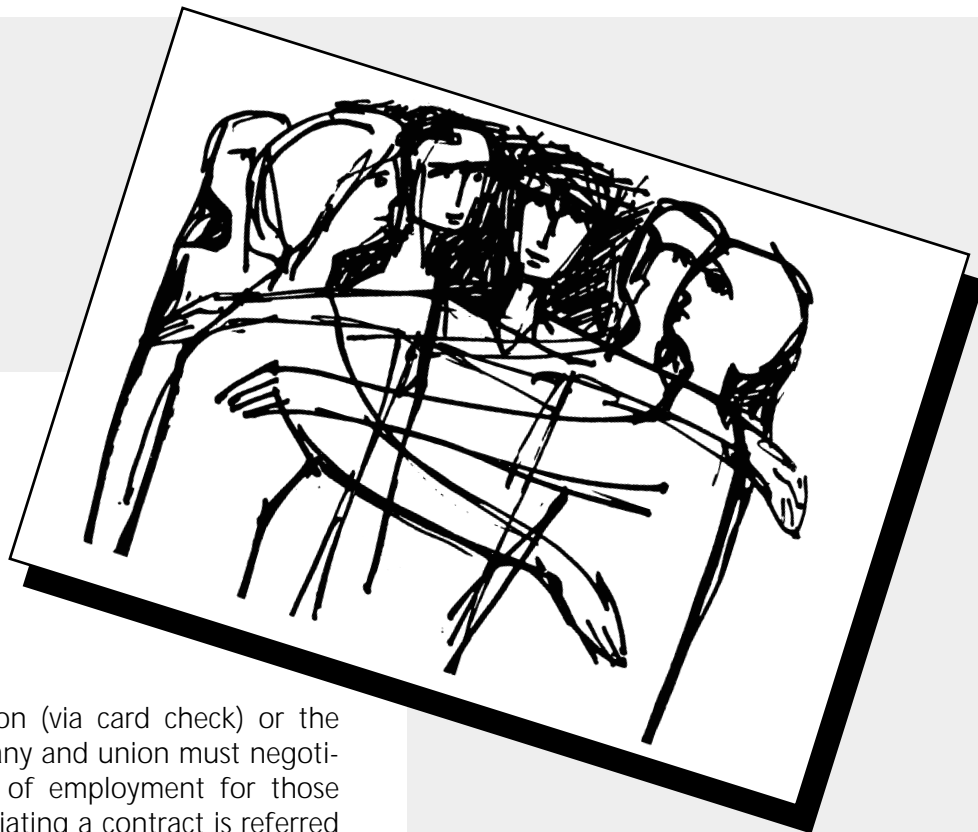
In most Canadian labor jurisdictions, if a majority of the workers in a company sign authorization cards, the company is required by law to negotiate a contract with that union.

In the United States, a company *may* recognize the cards as indicating the will of the workers and negotiate with the union, which can be done as a community-group supervised election. Or the company may choose to have a government-supervised election. The former is referred to as "card check recognition." The latter is referred to as "an NLRB election." NLRB stands for National Labor Relations Board, the government agency that oversees union elections. At least 30 percent of the workers must sign cards before the NLRB will schedule an election.

Election is held.

If the employer insists on an NLRB election, there may well be delays before the workers actually get to vote. Many employers challenge who is eligible to vote, claiming that certain workers shouldn't be included in the "bargaining unit." Only after all the challenges are resolved can the workers actually vote. If over fifty percent of the workers vote to be represented by the union, the company is legally obligated to negotiate "in good faith" with the union.

Once a union is formed



Negotiating a Contract.

Once the company recognizes the union (via card check) or the union wins an NLRB election, the company and union must negotiate a contract which spells out terms of employment for those workers eligible for the contract. Negotiating a contract is referred to as collective bargaining. When relations between unions and management are decent, contracts can usually be agreed to in a relatively short period of time – a few days, a few weeks, or at most a few months. Negotiations that drag on longer than a few months usually do so because a company does not want a contract. Unfortunately, one in three workers in the U.S. who votes for a union for the first time never gets a contract.

Usually, the union bargaining team is composed of leaders from the organizing committee and union representatives familiar with contracts and bargaining.

Enforcing the Contract.

A union contract sets forth the terms of employment and a grievance mechanism for dealing with disagreements. A shop steward is the person who assists workers in filing grievances and using the grievance process. The union has a legal obligation to assist workers in the process. A shop steward is usually a worker who has special training in understanding the contract.

Renewing the Contract.

Because contracts are for specific periods of time, such as one year or three years, the contract will "come up for renewal." For most union-management relations, this is a fairly straightforward process. In other situations, it can become contentious. The traditional way for workers to exercise pressure on a company is to go on strike. This is almost always a last resort for workers, because it is so hard on their families. *(See a more detailed discussion of strikes on page 7.)*

Difficulties faced by workers who choose to form unions

Unfortunately, U.S. workers face a very hostile climate for organizing unions. Workers who choose to organize for a collective voice on the job are often viewed as disloyal troublemakers. This is true even in some religious institutions that claim to protect workers' rights to organize.

In a recent survey, 44 percent of all working Americans who are not currently represented by unions would vote to join a union if they had the opportunity to do so without risking their jobs. Workers are afraid.

This hostile environment toward unions is created both by weak labor protections in the law, and by an aggressive union-busting industry. No industrialized nation has weaker laws, nor such a vibrant union-busting industry. The antiunion climate in this country is quite unique to the United States.

U.S. Labor law is dominated by the National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) and the Taft-Hartley amendments. The original National Labor Relations Act was passed in 1935 to improve workers' living standards by increasing the power of unions. Over the course of the next sixty-five years, the intent of the law has been changed via amendments to the Act and various judicial and administrative decisions that weaken the power of unions. The Taft-Hartley amendments to the NLRA, passed in 1947, strengthened managers' abilities to oppose unions. The amendments permitted the employers to campaign against union representation as long as there was "no threat of reprisal or force or promise of benefit."

The weak laws alone would be bad enough for workers who choose to organize. But a sophisticated, \$500-million-a-year industry has developed to consult and advise employers on how to oppose unions. Over 80 percent of companies faced with union organizing efforts wage anti-union campaigns.

What happens to workers who attempt to organize?

- Most workers are required by their employers (91 percent) to attend mandatory meetings on work time where workers are told why unions are bad and why they should vote against a union.
- Over 10,000 workers are illegally fired each year for exercising their "right to organize."
- Half of private sector employers threaten to eliminate all the workers' jobs if they join together in a union.

Kate Brofenbrenner, Cornell University.

Most of this antiunion activity occurs after the workers have signed cards indicating they want to be represented by a union, and before the official NLRB-supervised election. If the point of an election is to determine what workers really want, then it would seem that both sides – the union and the management – should be able to present their cases fairly. But given the laws, the antiunion campaigns, and the control that employers have over workers' lives, the cases are not presented evenly. In effect, the time between signing cards and holding an election appears to be a time to scare workers into voting against unions.

As a result, many unions are advocating for "card check recognition," as a fairer way of determining what workers really want.

Whether there is an NLRB-supervised election, a card-check recognition, or a community-sponsored election, the principles of fairness and respect for one another must be maintained. All parties, employees and employers, must treat one another with respect and fairness.

After an election or card-check recognition, it is important for the union and management to negotiate a contract, a set of rules, and terms of work. This contract sets wages, benefits, working conditions and clarifies basic values and expectations. The contract is where the different perspectives between employers and employees get resolved into something everyone can agree to.

According to the law, all parties must bargain "in good faith." Although it is difficult to prove legally that someone isn't bargaining in good faith, experience has shown that if everyone really wants to negotiate a contract, it can be done in a relatively short period of time. When negotiations drag out for long periods of time, it usually means that there are major unresolvable differences of opinion or that management does not want a contract. Because one key goal of unions is to negotiate contracts, it is seldom unions that create long delays. It is possible that a union would not agree to a particular contract proposal.

If a union and management can not come to some agreement over a contract, union members can vote to go on strike. Although much publicized, strikes occur in a very small percentage of contract negotiations. Most workers are reluctant to strike and only use it as a last resort. In a strike, workers withhold their labor for a certain period of time in order to put pressure on the company to negotiate a contract. During a strike, workers lose their wages, and are ineligible for public benefits such as unemployment insurance or food stamps (unless they were previously eligible); no one wins in a strike.



Under the law, there are two different kinds of strikes. One is an unfair labor practice strike, and the other is an economic strike. For example, if a company fired three union supporters for their union activities, the union members could vote to go out on strike. This would be an unfair labor practice strike. If a company proposed reducing workers' pay by \$1 per hour, the workers might vote to go on strike and it would be an economic strike.

Under U.S. labor law, even though the law says workers have the "right to strike," if the workers go out on an economic strike, they can be permanently replaced. This right to strike, but right to lose your job, is one of the oddities of U.S. labor law. No other industrialized nation allows companies to permanently replace striking workers.

Though it is technically legal in the U.S., permanent replacement of striking workers is not ethical. Most religious bodies in the U.S. have publicly condemned the practice of permanently replacing striking workers, because it upsets the balance of power between employees and employers.

Equally despicable is the uniquely U.S. corporate practice of locking out workers before a contract can be settled. In a few situations, when workers attempt to negotiate a contract, the corporate management decides that things aren't going well and it simply locks the doors and refuses to let the existing workers in. Replacement workers are hired to take the jobs of the locked-out workers. This practice, called a "lockout," has received little public attention, but is thoroughly outside the ethical principles outlined by the various faith traditions.

What about union corruption?

Unions, like religious bodies, are made up of human beings with all their flaws and frailties. There is some corruption in unions, as there is some within religious bodies. And, wherever corruption or greed is uncovered, it must be cleaned up. Most unions have rigorous procedures to combat corruption. When a local union is found to be corrupt, the national leadership will take over control of the local until it can be cleaned up and an election of new leaders held. As wrong as union corruption is, it is unfortunate that union corruption receives so much front page media attention, compared with the important justice work done by unions to raise wages, benefits and working conditions for low-wage workers.

What about union violence?

When workers are locked out, their jobs moved overseas, or their economic livelihood threatened, it is understandable that some people might respond with violence. But violence is something all national labor leaders abhor. Across the country, union members, on a regular basis, practice and preach nonviolence. And while there may always be some workers who act out their anger violently, this is *not* the modus operandi for unions.

When union-busting consultants want to denigrate unions they describe them as violent and show photos of violence on a picket line. Violence is wrong, whether it is workers on a picket line, security guards harassing picketers, or companies causing economic violence against workers.

What about racism and sexism?

Racism and sexism are sins shared by unions and the religious community. The new leadership of the AFL-CIO has as one of its key goals ensuring full participation for all in work, in society, and in unions. The AFL-CIO has made significant progress in making its leadership reflect its membership, although much still needs to be done. Within each union and the federation, there are strong groups advocating for broader racial and gender diversity.

Are unions really needed?

If the world were perfect and all employers were fair, honest and shared fully with workers, maybe not. But even if employers were perfect, workers might still want to organize. Humans organize themselves into groups that make sense to them. Human beings have the God-given right to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Workers care deeply about their jobs and want a voice in workplace decisions.

We live in an economic society devoted more to bottom-line profit than to people. Most corporate decisions that hurt workers are not driven by a desire to hurt workers, but rather a desire to increase profits or compete in a very competitive global market. Individual workers need an organized voice to challenge the priorities of companies and our economic system.

In our society, unions are the primary vehicle for worker representation in the workplace. Over the years, unions have proved themselves as advocates for justice in the society. Many workers view union as advocates for justice for the future. When unions seek justice in the workplace and the society at large, the religious community should be an ally.



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