

Unions

General Questions

Why are unions important?

There are lots of advantages to union representation. And people's reasons for joining can be very different. The truth is, most people join unions to protect themselves from management's unfair, arbitrary or even malicious behavior.

What are union dues? What are they used for?

Union dues are the money you pay to the union to help pay for union support staff, legal costs, negotiation costs, arbitrator's fees, etc. Dues can range anywhere from \$200-\$500 a year depending on the industry, the union, and the amount of money the union members make.

What's a "union shop"?

This means that all employees in the bargaining unit (see above) must be a part of the union or at least pay their fair share to the union for representation services. It's a standard part of most contracts. It enables the union to bargain from a stronger position, which benefits all employees.

Even if they voted against the union? Is that fair?

Well, for better or worse, it is how democracy in our country works. What the majority votes for, the minority has to live with. Is it unfair that Dole supporters have to live with Clinton as president? And remember, even those who opposed the union receive all the protections and rights of the contract including any increases in wages and/or benefits. Would it be fair for them to be "free riders"?

What's a "local"?

A union is set up kind of like the United States. There is a national government, but many of the decisions that really affect you are on the state level. This is even truer of a union. There is an international union that oversees national operations. But the local takes care of the contract, helps employees that want help with managerial problems, etc.

So what's this "International" do?

They lobby Congress for changes in laws that would benefit workers, send help to any locals that need it, coordinate national organizing efforts, etc.

Can you give me a better idea of what will happen during a union drive?

You'll be asked at some point to sign a union card. Once about 65-75% of the employees in the bargaining unit are signed up (legally, you could file with as few as 30% of employees signed up, but it's best to wait for a solid majority), the cards are submitted to the NLRB. (The National Labor Relations Board, the government agency that oversees union/management relations.) The bargaining unit (see above) is finalized either by the NLRB or by agreement between the company and union. An election date is set. The secret ballot election is held and a majority wins. Of course, during the few weeks before the election, both management and pro-union employees will try to disseminate information. Management will do this through mandatory meetings and memos in your mailboxes. Pro-union employees will try to get you to talk with them about concerns, hold voluntary meetings and may mail stuff to your home. Tensions may start to run high, but the best way to avoid this is by feeling free to talk with you coworkers about your concerns.

How democratic are unions?

The whole process is democratic. You get to decide if you want to sign a card. You decide to vote yes or no for union representation. You decide what you want in a contract. You decide which employees will be on the negotiating team. You vote to ratify the contract or not. You vote on who will be your shop steward. Every 3 years you vote on who will be the officials of the local.

What if I have more questions? Feel free to ask around. Ask both pro-union folk and management. Both would love to answer your questions. Stop by a unionized workplace (ask a pro-union person to get you a list or ask a union organizer where such a store is) and talk to the employees there. See what they think of their union.

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