

# UNIONS 101

## A Quick Study of How Unions Help Workers Win a

### What is a union?

A union is a group of workers who form an organization to win:

- Respect on the job;
- Better wages and benefits;
- More flexibility for work and family needs;
- A counter-balance to the unchecked power of employers; and
- 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 contact a union to help guide their organizing efforts to join a union. Once a majority of workers show they want a union, sometimes employers honor the workers' choice. Often, the workers must ask the government 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?

Yes. Under the law, which supports freedom of association, 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 or to lay off employees or take away benefits if workers form a union.



### What kinds of workers are forming unions today?

A wider range of people than ever before, including many women and immigrants, are building unions—doctors and nurses, poultry workers and graduate employees, home health care aides and 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 28 percent more than nonunion workers and are more likely to receive health care and pension benefits than those without a union.

In 2000, union members' median weekly earnings for full-time wage and salary were \$696, compared with \$542 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 working Americans 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.

### What challenges face workers today?

Today, thousands of workers want to join unions. The wisest employers understand that when workers form unions, their companies also benefit. But many other employers fight workers' efforts to come together by intimidating, harassing and threatening them. In response, workers are reaching out to their communities to help them exercise their freedom to improve their lives.

### What about workers in other countries?

Unions fight to ensure that corporations and governments around the world respect *all* workers' fundamental rights to:

- Come together and negotiate with employers;
- Refuse forced labor;
- Reject child labor; and
- Work free from discrimination.