How today's unions help working people

Americans have always joined together—whether in parent teacher associations or local community organizations—to solve problems and make changes that improve their lives and their communities. Through unions, people join together to strive for improvements at the place where they spend a large portion of their waking hours: work.

The freedom of workers to join together in unions and negotiate with employers (in a process known as collective bargaining) is widely recognized as a fundamental human right across the globe. In the United States, this right is protected by the U.S. Constitution and U.S. law and is supported by a majority of Americans.

Over 16 million working women and men in the United States are exercising this right—these 16 million workers are represented by unions. Overall, more than one in nine U.S. workers are represented by unions. This representation makes organized labor one of the largest institutions in America.

By providing data on union coverage, activities, and impacts, this report helps explain how unions fit into the economy today; how they affect workers, communities, occupations and industries, and the country at large; and why collective bargaining is essential for a fair and prosperous economy and a vibrant democracy. It also describes how decades of anti-union campaigns and policies have made it much harder for working people to use their collective voice to sustain their standard of living.

'Collective bargaining' is how working people gain a voice at work and the power to shape their working lives

Almost everyone has at one point felt unheard or powerless as an employee. Joining a union simply means that you and your colleagues have a say because you negotiate important elements of employment conditions together. That could mean securing wage increases, better access to health care, workplace safety enhancements, and more reasonable and predictable hours. Through collective bargaining negotiations, the union also works with management to develop a process for settling disputes that employees and their managers are unable to settle individually.

Once a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) is agreed to, union representatives work with employees and with management to make sure the rights and obligations spelled out in the agreement are honored. And they represent workers in high-stakes situations, such as when a safety violation has resulted in injury. By these means, collective bargaining gives workers a say in the terms of their employment, the security of

knowing that there are specific processes for handling work-related grievances, and a path to solving problems.

To cover expenses for negotiating contracts, defending workers' rights, resolving disputes, and providing support to members of the bargaining unit, unions collect dues.

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) of 1935 and amendments govern private-sector unions and collective bargaining. While states generally have no jurisdiction over private-sector unions, the NLRA as amended does allow states to enact certain laws that govern fees paid by workers in unionized private workplaces (discussed later in this report).

Nearly half (48.1 percent) of workers covered by a union contract are public-sector workers. Collective bargaining among federal workers is covered by the Federal Labor Relations Act of 1978 (FLRA). State laws (enacted from the late 1950s forward) govern state and local government employee unions. Each state has its own set of laws that govern collective bargaining for state and local public employees. Some states allow the full set of collective bargaining rights, others (approximately one-fifth) prohibit collective bargaining, and still others limit some activities, such as the right to strike or the right to collect dues automatically during payroll processing. About one in 10 states have no state law addressing collective bargaining rights in the public sector.

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