

Why be in the Union When They get What we get?

Have you ever had a co-worker ask you why they should pay union dues when the non-union employees get the same benefits as the union employees?

When a co-worker raises this question what they are really asking is, “what is the union benefit and why should I pay for it?” This question presents an opportunity to educate a co-worker about the benefits of being union.

There’s Much More To the Union Contract Than a Cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) and Health Care

A union labor contract is much more comprehensive than just COLA and health care. A union contract creates a binding and enforceable contract covering many areas of employment including the benefits of seniority, layoff processes, recall processes, vacation, sick leave, no discipline without just cause, the hours and conditions of your labor including overtime protections and much more. Years, if not decades, of labor negotiations are memorialized in the labor contract. Each word labor discussed, fought over and maybe even went on strike for.

Although some non-union members may be getting some of these benefits, they are not getting all of them and the key is that the union employees have a contract with the employer regarding these wages and benefits and the employer cannot change them without negotiating with the union.

This is a type of security that a non-union employee does not have. As a non-union employee, your employer can alter your wage, classification, duties, sick leave, health care, or anything else for any non-discriminatory reason (or no reason) at any time.

Representation

Not only does the contract provide a binding agreement with the employer, it also provides for membership in a larger union family that provides the benefit of numbers, unity, education, leadership, organization and representation.

When your contract with your employer is broken, you have advocates like stewards, union representatives, communications specialist, and lobbyists ready to assist you. When non-union members are forced to pay thousands of dollars for legal assistance, often with limited recourse, union members have all of the same resources made available to them as part of membership.

There is also a full staff ready to help workplace leaders and members achieve union goals including negotiations expertise, dispute resolution, navigation of politics, and access to larger union resources.

Raising The Standard For Everyone

At Local 17, there are almost 9,000 members working collectively to make a difference in their lives and the lives of their co-workers. Little by little, we create change.



Although non-union employees may get many of the same benefits as union employees, the concerted work of the union community is often the reason for the level of benefit.

With the unions at the negotiations table, lobbying elected leaders, advocating in the community, and working with management concerning wages, benefits and other terms and conditions of employment, the employer is often pushed much further than they would have gone had they been able to set the wage or the benefits unilaterally.

Holding The Line

Also, in these tough economic times, union contracts are helping to hold the line. Employers who would have otherwise decided not to provide COLAs, or to cut hours, impose furloughs, and the like, are forced to deal with unions who have guaranteed wages and other benefits in place that cannot be altered unilaterally by management without agreement.

When a contract provides for a benefit, like a COLA, then management is compelled to provide it to non-union employees too, even if they would have preferred not to. (Otherwise non-union folks would organize if they saw union workers getting a COLA they did not get). And, if large groups of employees organized, then the power a large union membership creates would be formidable and employers often fear this type of power.

What Is Possible

When all workers in a workplace are in a union, understand the rights of the union and the right to negotiate; know the power structures and how to affect them; and comprehend the benefits of a union contract, then the possibilities for what the union is able to achieve are broad.

Part of Something Important

Union membership is not just about one workplace or one employee, being a union member is about being part of a social justice movement. A movement where workers locally, regionally, nationally and globally are advocating for things like vacation and sick leave for all workers, humane and safe working conditions, environmental justice, wage equity, education accessibility and quality, and fighting against slavery, forced labor, child labor, slave wages, discrimination and exploitation of human and natural resources, and much more. Basically, the labor movement believes there should be benefits of work and that everyone deserves fruits from their labor, although this is denied to many. — *By Carrie Blackwood, Local 17 Union Representative and Training Director*

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