

APPENDIX

Collective Bargaining

Collective bargaining is the primary activity of unions that have achieved certification as official bargaining agents for groups of workers. It refers to activity undertaken to improve wages, hours and working conditions, or to protect negotiated conditions. It is “collective” because it is conducted by the workers themselves, or by their elected representatives.

Contract negotiations are part of collective bargaining. Most unions have an elected or appointed negotiating team made up of staff, officers and/or rank-and-file members. Typically, some negotiating team members have bargaining experience, while others are new to the process. Sometimes legal assistance is sought, but unions are more likely to rely on staff as spokespeople at the bargaining table. Unions encourage the active involvement of their members in contract negotiations. The more active members are in their union’s negotiations, the stronger the union is at the bargaining table. Member involvement can take many forms, including:

- Members express their opinions to the bargaining team at meetings and in written surveys;
- Members are kept informed throughout the bargaining process;
- Members engage in rallies and other actions to support the bargaining team; and
- In most unions, members are entitled to vote on (or “ratify”) an agreement tentatively reached by the team.

Most unions have a contract ratification process in their constitutions, whereby members vote to accept or reject an agreement tentatively reached by their teams.

Grievance Process

The grievance process and handling of other workplace issues/problems also are considered part of collective bargaining, in the sense that “bargaining” occurs over how the contract is to be interpreted during the years it is in effect. This aspect of collective bargaining sometimes is referred to as contract administration, and it is the area in which stewards are the most heavily involved. In our Labor Management Partnership, we have a process known as issue resolution, which allows the parties to focus on resolving a broad range of issues, including those beyond the collective bargaining agreement.

Most union organizing is conducted through elections and supervised by the National Labor Relations Board. In our Labor Management Partnership, we have agreed with the unions for a neutral card-check procedure by which employees may choose representation by a partnering union.

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Organizing Efforts

Union strength arises from a variety of considerations. One important factor is the size of the union (number of workers represented) and/or the extent of the relevant occupation/industry that is organized.

The Union Numbers—Then and Now

“Union density” peaked in 1945–1946 and in 1954, when 35 percent of workers were union members. Although the percentages began to fall, the number of union members continued to grow, from 17 million in 1954 to 20.2 million in 1978. But in 1983, membership dipped to 17.7 million (20.1 percent of workers).

Since 1983, the union share of wage and salary workers has declined in private nonagricultural industries from 17 percent to less than 10 percent, but the share has increased slightly in government, where it stands at 37 percent. The 16.1 million U.S. workers who belonged to unions in 2008 represented 12.4% of the total wage and salary workforce.

Currently, 13.5 percent of hospital workers are organized in unions (down from 14.2 percent in 1991). The decline in union membership has spurred many unions to intensify their organizing efforts, devoting increasingly larger proportions of staff and budget to bringing new groups of workers into the union.

Most union organizing is conducted through elections and is supervised by the National Labor Relations Board. In our Labor Management Partnership, we have agreed with the unions for a neutral card-check procedure, by which employees may choose to form unions by signing a card indicating their desire to do so.

Organizing the Membership

The other important source of union strength is the activism and loyalty of its members. Unions therefore put time and resources into “internal organizing”—encouraging the interest and involvement of members in union activities.

Member participation in the union goes beyond attending membership meetings. Members get involved during contract negotiations. They are encouraged to work together to solve problems both formally and informally.

They are given opportunities to engage in lobbying and other political activities. Sometimes, they are encouraged to assist as volunteer organizers, as stewards, or in other positions of responsibility. The more active and engaged the members are, the stronger the union is as a whole.

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Education and Training

Unions provide a variety of education and training opportunities to their members, stewards, staff and officers. Some of the training is in the “nuts and bolts” of union activity (e.g., such things as grievance handling and labor law). Some is leadership training (e.g., communications skills, public speaking, meeting facilitation). Some is education on broader issues (e.g., economics, political action, history). Unions also send members to educational programs sponsored by nearby labor education centers.

Leadership Development

Related to the training function of unions, leadership development also includes identification and mentoring of potential leaders. Some unions have formal leadership development programs (e.g., taking members out of the workplace temporarily to learn and practice organizing skills).

Political/Legislative/Electoral Action

Most unions have a political program designed to elect and lobby legislators friendly to their issues. Some unions make substantial financial contributions to these political efforts, but mostly rely on members for “people power” to work phone banks, walk precincts, etc.

Stewards

Most locals have stewards who are working members trained to handle on-the-job problems and grievances. Some locals elect their stewards; in others, stewards are appointed. Stewards are typically in close contact with the paid/elected staff from their local union. The structure of the steward system largely is determined by the internal dynamic of the union and its relationship with the employer. In most cases, the union’s goal is to have a steward in every unit and on every shift, but this is often a challenge.

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Union Staff

Most locals have full-time hired or elected staff (called field representatives, business agents, internal organizers, etc.) whose responsibilities include coordinating negotiations and contract administration for particular bargaining units. The jobs of these individuals can include a variety of activities, depending on the local union. Examples are training and assisting stewards, coordinating bargaining activities and developing internal organizing campaigns. The role of union staff in partnership activities also varies from union to union.

Membership Meetings

All locals have regular membership meetings. In all locals, the membership is the ultimate decision-making body and can overturn decisions of the Executive Board if they so choose. The rules of internal union activity are laid out in the constitution and by-laws of the union. These documents spell out everything from the election procedures and duties of officers to the procedure for ratifying contracts to dues rates.

