



Frequently Asked Questions.

Question:

What are unions for and what do they do?

Answer:

Unions are about working people coming together for a common purpose — to make workplaces fairer and our lives better.

They make sure workers are respected, get decent pay and conditions, and that our workplaces are healthy and safe.

Unions are there when you need them. They provide expert advice on wages, conditions and rights; assistance for workplace problems; and access to union lawyers if you get hurt at work.

Through collective bargaining and union campaigns, Australian workers have achieved a great deal:

- Award wages & conditions
- Annual leave
- Sick leave
- Overtime pay & penalty rates
- Protection from unfair dismissal
- Workers' compensation
- Equal pay for women
- Parental leave and paid maternity leave
- Superannuation
- Medicare

All these are in place because working Australians through their unions have won them and keep on defending and improving them.

They are achievements that benefit working people not just in the workplace, but in their day-to-day family lives. They are important examples of how unions are working for a better life for all workers and are all strong reasons for joining a union.

Question:

What are the benefits of joining a union?

Answer:

To protect your rights at work, the best thing you can do is join a union.

Union members are in a stronger position to secure higher pay and conditions through collective bargaining. The more workers that are in a union, the more likely they will get a good deal.

- Union members earn on average almost \$100 a week more than non-union employees (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2009)

- Union members get better sick leave and holiday leave and are more likely to receive long service leave and paid parental leave
- Union members are better trained, have better working conditions, work fewer hours and have more job security
- Having union members in the workplace increases Health and Safety awareness by up to 70%.

Union members also get specialist advice and support whenever they need it from a network of expert staff and workplace delegates.

Members receive professional help with:

- Wages and entitlements
- Unfair treatment and harassment at work
- Work-related injuries or illnesses
- Collective bargaining for better pay and conditions
- Superannuation and retirement

Question:

What have unions achieved in the past and how can they help me today?

Answer:

Many of the things we take for granted today have been won for us by the efforts of union members in the past.

Working Australians didn't get these rights because employers gave them to us or because governments just decided to make laws to help working people. These rights exist because workers acting together in unions have campaigned and struggled hard for them.

Decent wages, annual leave, sick leave, overtime rates, penalty rates, workers' compensation, equal pay, maternity leave, superannuation and health & safety laws are all in place because of unions.

In recent years there are many important examples of how unions have defended and extended the rights of workers. New, fairer industrial relations laws starting in July 2009 mean that:

- All workers will have protection from being dismissed unfairly after WorkChoices took away this right for more than four million Australians.
- Workers' pay and conditions, including penalty rates, overtime pay, public holidays and allowances will be guaranteed by a 10-point safety net and modern awards that cannot be undermined.

- Workers have a clear and democratic right to bargain for a collective agreement — and employers must be fair dinkum about getting a result.
- There is a new independent umpire with real teeth to assist workers with bargaining, to settle disputes, and to oversee the safety net and set minimum wages.
- AWA's (Australian Workplace Agreements) that rip off workers have been banned and individual contracts must be above the industry award.
- Basic rights to belong to or be represented by a union cannot be eroded by threats of dismissal, pressure, or victimization.

Unions have also won a new national scheme of paid parental leave that will start soon (January 2011) and give all working families 18 weeks of financial support when they have a baby.

Question:

Can one person joining a union help make a difference?

Answer:

The more workers who join the union, the stronger position the union will be in. We all want to protect what we've got and improve on it, but the fewer people there are in the union, the less chance we have of doing that.

If people took the attitude that they can benefit from the work the union does without joining, we would soon have no union members and no one would have the benefits workers enjoy.

To make sure we have a voice at work, enjoy good wages and conditions and live in a fairer society – then it's up to all of us to get involved.

Question:

What can unions do for me that I can't do for myself?

Answer:

It makes sense that workers are better off when we all join together than when we act alone. Employers look after themselves first and most have got lawyers and specialists to help them. Unions look out for the interests of workers.

Today, unions employ professional organizers, industrial officers as well as researchers and lawyers who look after people in all sorts of jobs and can negotiate better wages and conditions.

The union is also able to give the latest information and support on things such as health & safety.

Industrial relations is a complicated area. You might be a skilled worker and good at your job, but would you feel confident negotiating a pay rise or calculating all of your entitlements or knowing the dangers of radiation, nanoparticles or other chemicals you may be exposed to at work?

Question:

Are most industrial disputes settled without strikes?

Answer:

The vast majority of disputes or problems in workplaces are sorted out without the need to go on strike. A phone call or a letter is all that's needed to sort out many individual problems.

Most collective agreements are successfully negotiated without the need for industrial action. The media usually aren't interested

in all the things unions achieve for their members and so these things don't hit the news like strikes do.

However, sometimes members of the union do decide to go on strike and if they do, it's a collective decision that is not taken lightly.

Question:

Are there benefits to joining a union, even if I get on well with my employer?

Answer:

Even if you are getting on well with your boss this week, you never know when you may need a union. If things turn bad for the business, there is a takeover or workers being laid off, you might suddenly need help.

You have to be a member to get help from the union, so it's important not to leave it too late to join.

Besides, employers get legal or financial advice or help from a business association whenever they need it so why shouldn't you? Being in a union doesn't mean you don't like your boss, it's about supporting what unions stand for and acknowledging your interests are different from your employer.

Question:

What are the financial benefits of joining a union?

Answer:

Getting better pay and conditions can be one of the direct benefits of joining a union, especially if the union negotiates your collective agreement.

You also benefit from all the work unions have done before to lift pay and conditions as well as campaigns that unions run each year on behalf of all Australian workers such as the Minimum Wage case or the move to lift superannuation contributions.

Union membership fees are also tax deductible. For most workers that means a saving of around 30% of union fees just by claiming them in your tax return.

There are additional benefits that the union gets for workers, like low cost banking and loans, financial advice, quality insurance, cheap movie tickets and savings through discount shopping.

Question:

Which union should I join?

Answer:

There is a union for every Australian worker. Unions Australia is a new confidential membership and advice service that can advise which union is best for you. Go to unionsaustralia.com.au or phone 1300 4 UNION.

Australian Unions



Working for a
better life.

