

Unions: What are they? Adapted from CIC Toronto

Many workplaces have unions.

They were set up in the 1800s to help protect workers from being mistreated by their bosses.

Since then, unions have also helped workers get:

- increased minimum wages
- overtime pay rates
- vacation pay rates
- severance pay (an amount paid to an employee upon dismissal or discharge from a workplace)
- unemployment insurance benefits
- maternity leave benefits
- ...and much more!

Unions also negotiate with employers for benefits such as:

- higher wages
- medical insurance protection
- sickness and accident benefits
- parking facilities
- paid vacation plans
- dental care
- drug plans
- life insurance benefits
- training and retraining
- equal pay for equal work

Will you be working in a unionized workplace?

Guess which of these professions are unionized:

Musicians

Secretaries

Teachers

Bank Tellers

Actors

Auto Workers

Baseball Players

Police Officers

Airline Pilots

Answer: All of them!

Who does not belong to a union?

Self-employed people

Many people who work for small companies

Farmers

What if I work in a unionized workplace?

• In some workplaces, there are many unions. For example, in a school, teachers belong to one union, and secretaries and caretakers belong to another union.

- In other workplaces, there is one union that helps the workers in many locations.
- Depending on the union and the *collective agreement* with the employer, you may or may not be required to join the union and pay *union dues*.

- There are different types of union set-ups:

- **Closed shop** The employer will only hire union members.
- **Union Shop** You must join the union within a certain amount of time, after joining the company.
- **“Rand formula” shop** You don’t have to join the union, but you still have to pay the dues.
- **Open shop** You do not have to join the union or pay dues, but you may not be protected by the union or get its benefits either.

How would I join the union?

- As a Co-op student, you will not be able to join the union.
- If the company hires you, you should be given the information about joining your company’s union.

Who would I talk to about the union?

- You may speak with the *shop steward*, who is the union’s representative at your workplace, if you have any complaints about your treatment (for example, if you are discriminated against), or if there is a safety problem being overlooked. There may also be a *workplace health and safety representative* who is the person you should speak with about any hazards in the workplace. Both of these people are regular employees who also hold these roles.

Why do union members go on strike?

- Unions have contracts, or *collective bargaining agreements*, with the employer. These have expiry dates. Each time the contract comes up for renewal, times have usually changed. (Prices have gone up for everything at the stores, and there may be new changes in the workplace.) The union tries to negotiate a better contract for its workers, and the employer tries to keep expenses as low as possible. When the union and employer can’t agree, then there may be a strike action.

What is a strike?

- A strike is organized by the union to put pressure on the employer.
- Workers might refuse to do something extra that they regularly do (such as staying late to tidy their work stations) to show the employer how valuable they usually are. (This is called *work to rule*.)
- Or workers might walk off the job (called a *walkout*).
- Or the employer might put pressure on the union and the workers by not letting them into the building to do their jobs, so that the workers won’t be paid their regular salaries (called a *lockout*).

What if the union is going on strike?

- For your Co-op placement, you will be moved to a different placement.
- Later on in your life, if you are a regular employee at the company, you can check with your union representative about what type of strike action is planned, and what you can/should do.

The Nasty Language

- If a workplace is on strike, and the employer hires new people to do their jobs, the replacement workers are called *scabs*. It’s not a nice word.
- If your union goes on strike, and you go to work anyway, you are “crossing the picket line,” and you will also be called a scab. When the strike is over, you may not be very well-liked at work anymore if you have been a scab.

- This nasty language exists as a form of pressure. Since groups are stronger than individuals, there is a pressure to keep all of the workers bonded as a group.

Examples of Unions

*NOTE: Large unions are divided into different **locals** depending on location and the particular sectors they represent. (E.g. UFCW 1000A is one local of UFCW.)

<u>UNION NAME</u>	<u>WORKERS REPRESENTED</u>
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1. UFCW (United Food and Commercial Workers Canada)

UFCW represents members in every sector of the food industry from the field to the grocery store. It also represents members working in retail, healthcare, security and many other industries. (Ex: A cashier working at Loblaws in Ottawa would be a member of UFCW 1000A.)

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2. CUPE (Canadian Union of Public Employees)

CUPE represents over 650 000 Canadian workers employed in social services, municipalities, transportation, emergency services, airlines, and more. (Ex. A Camp Counsellor working for the City of Ottawa would be a member of CUPE 503.)

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3. CAW(Canadian Auto Workers)

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(Ex. A taxi driver in Ottawa would be a member of CAW Local 1688.)

Union Assignment

Now it's your turn! On the Internet, look up one (1) union, and list the workers that are represented by these unions.

Can you find a union that represents students?

Give more details about the union and what programs they offer?

(For example, do they help workers get benefits such as healthcare coverage, child care, job protection, and overtime?) Give enough information to earn 5 marks. (Make 5 points)

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1.	