

# Frequently Asked Questions About Unions

## ***Why do workers need labor unions?***

To deal with the power of business owners, workers united in an organization can negotiate collectively and take other collective action to achieve their goals. As Frederick Douglass, the great abolitionist and woman's rights advocate once put it, "If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Power concedes [gives] nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will."

## ***Do union workers really earn more with a union contract than without one?***

Yes, union workers earn approximately 25% more than their non-union counterparts in the same jobs, with the biggest increases for workers in the lowest paid occupations. In addition to wages, unions include a variety of benefit plans in the contracts they negotiate with employers, depending on their bargaining power. For example, these could range from medical benefits that are fully paid for by the employer to union-run benefit plans that employees contribute to on a monthly basis.

## ***What is a union contract?***

When a union bargains a contract with the employer, both sides sit down to negotiate a legally binding agreement that sets up the rules that govern worker-management relations at the job site. Besides wages, other issues typically negotiated in union contracts include health care, pensions, promotion policies, vacations and holidays, work schedules, etc.

A crucial part of all union contracts is the grievance procedure, which is a step-by-step conflict resolution process workers can follow if they feel management has violated the contract. In addition, union workers have the right to be represented by a shop steward, a worker elected by the other workers as their on-site union representative, in any grievance proceeding with management.

## ***Do unions already have too much power?***

Union membership was highest in the early 1950s, when unions represented about 35% of all workers. Today union membership has declined to about 12% with both private business and public sector employment combined. Just 8% of all private business and industry in the U.S. is unionized.

## ***Is it true that unions can charge members whatever they want for dues and do anything they want with the money? Aren't unions really corrupt?***

No. Membership dues, as well as restrictions on their use, are regulated by federal law. Typically, dues are no more than two hours of a worker's pay per month. Unions are democratic organizations created to improve the lives of working people, and as such, members participate at all levels of decision-making. Not only do they elect shop stewards and union officers to run the day to day operations of the union, but they must also approve any contract that is negotiated by their union bargaining team with the management. Unions are no more corrupt than any other institution, and in fact, are held to a higher standard of democratic participation than business because of federal laws that specifically define union activity.

## ***Don't unions force workers into strikes?***

The fact is that fewer than 1% of contract disputes involve strikes. The vast majority of unions require a vote (often by a majority of two thirds or more) to authorize a strike. Unions and workers view strikes as a last resort. Generally, they only strike when the boss is extremely unreasonable – after all, workers give up their paychecks when they go on strike together! And the strike is one of the original tools of non-violent resistance. Strike violence is rare – and rarely unprovoked. It is also important to realize that workers in this country lack an effective right to strike, because in the U.S., employers can permanently replace striking workers.

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## WHO MAKES HISTORY?

The way the past is presented—or not presented—affects how people think of their own capabilities. Here, using a Bertolt Brecht poem, students begin to consider the active, creative role that workers have played in the past and their potential strength in the future.

### Goals/Objectives

1. Students will be able to understand better the choices that historians make in writing history.
2. Students will develop an appreciation for the role of the ordinary people behind great historical events.

### Materials Needed

- **Student Handout #2: A Worker Reads History.**

### Time Required

- One class period.

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## Procedure

1. Have students number 1 through 10 on a sheet of paper.
  - In general, what kinds of things make people famous in U.S. history?
2. Tell students to write a list of the ten “most famous” people in the history of the United States.
  - Are there *other* people who should get recognition for participating in the same events as the “famous people”?
3. After they have finished, ask a few of them to share their lists. As someone suggests a name, have him/her say briefly why that person was selected.
  - Are there other categories of people in history who have done very important things but who have not received as much credit as the “famous” people?
4. Have all the students look over their lists. Ask them if they can make any generalizations about what the people they named have in common—e.g., are they mostly men? are there many presidents, athletes, explorers, or movie stars on the lists?
5. Discuss with students what type of accomplishment made each of the people on the lists famous.
  - 6. Distribute **Student Handout #2: A Worker Reads History** by Bertolt Brecht. Read the poem aloud with the class.
  - 7. Initiate a class discussion based on the following questions:
    - Who does the poet feel gets most of the credit in the history books?
    - Who else does he feel are the really

important people in history? What makes them important?

- Do you agree?
- Why doesn't history normally focus on workers and "common" people?
- How many working people did you include on your list?

8. Tell students that they are going to write a poem modeled after Brecht's search for the other unheralded people in history. Ask them to list a number of things in their daily lives in which the people who do or did the work are "hidden." For example, a baseball, a television program, a piece of fruit or a record album each represents a great deal

of human labor, which we don't usually see. Or they might think of jobs with which they are familiar—bakeries, janitorial or secretarial work, food preparation—that are isolated from the ultimate consumers.

After students have completed their lists, have them write a poem using the themes in Brecht's "A Worker Reads History." As a prompt, you might suggest they begin with a question as Brecht does, but with a current event or fact stimulating the thinking process, e.g., the fact that the average yearly compensation for Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) of the 500 largest corporations averages more than 430 times the salary of the average worker employed by them.

# STUDENT HANDOUT #2



## A WORKER READS HISTORY

By Bertolt Brecht

Who built the seven towers of Thebes?  
The books are filled with names of kings.  
Was it kings who hauled the craggy blocks of stone?  
And Babylon, so many times destroyed,  
Who built the city up each time? In which of Lima's houses,  
That city glittering with gold, lived those who built it?  
In the evening when the Chinese wall was finished  
Where did the masons go? Imperial Rome  
Is full of arcs of triumph. Who reared them up? Over whom  
Did the Caesars triumph? Byzantium lives in song,  
Were all her dwellings palaces? And even in Atlantis of the legend  
The night the sea rushed in,  
The drowning men still bellowed for their slaves.

Young Alexander plundered India.  
He alone?  
Caesar beat the Gauls.  
Was there not even a cook in his army?  
Philip of Spain wept as his fleet  
Was sunk and destroyed. Were there no other tears?  
Frederick the Great triumphed in the Seven Years War. Who  
Triumphed with him?

Each page victory,  
At whose expense the victory ball?  
Every ten years a great man,  
Who paid the piper?

So many particulars.  
So many questions.