

Unit 3: Workers and Union Membership

An apprentice in the Building Trades is a part of his or her union. This may or may not seem like a major life occurrence to you right now, but, depending on your ambition and dedication, it may well be.

Your union will offer you a dozen major benefits. It will:

- a. Pay for your education in the building trades, which amounts to, on average, a \$40,000 investment in your future**
- b. Allow you to earn much more than non-union construction workers**
- c. Enable you to pursue advancement on a nearly unlimited number of career paths**
- d. Provide free or inexpensive continuing education and training so that you can improve your skills or acquire new certifications throughout your career**
- e. Permit you to work in a relatively clean and safe environment**
- f. Market your skills to prospective employers until you find acceptable employment**
- g. Stand behind and protect you in the event of a dispute with your employer**
- h. Bargain collectively on your behalf for better wages, free benefits, and working conditions**
- i. Provide, to the limit of its resources, temporary aid to you and your family should you be laid off**
- j. Enable you to obtain health and accident insurance**
- k. Represent your political interests by lobbying federal, state, and local governments on behalf of you and fellow union members**
- l. Maintain a pension fund so that you are provided with disability benefits and a retirement pension for your present and future security**



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Responsible Craftsmanship

Membership in a craft industry has historically been based on demonstrated skill and knowledge of the trade. Many contractors have been journeymen who followed the path from apprentice to journeyman to foreman to contractor, based in large part upon their skills.

At one time, virtually all contractors were also journey-level workers. While the percentages of journeymen-owners has decreased with business mergers and acquisitions of companies by businessmen with little or no direct experience in the trade, the percentage of shops owned by journeymen is still high. In the sheet metal industry, they make up 80 percent of the construction sector.

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While the history of labor-management relationships has often been a tug-of-war, many industries have chosen in recent years to focus instead on the competence and skill of their members. Collective bargaining - the right to have a union negotiate wages and working conditions for its members - remains critically important to union members. But even more so is the expectation that members of a trade union will excel in their crafts. It is to ensure the continuation of this competence that many national unions and their contractor organization counterparts have formed JATCs at the local level and a similar organization at the national level, which produces curricula and guides training evolution. Union members have negotiated to have an amount paid into training funds, for each member hour worked; ensuring that the training needs of the craft industries will remain well-funded.

There's a saying in the trade that "Together We Do It Better." That sentiment couldn't be more accurate than in the cooperation between union members and contractors in providing for the continuing education of apprentices and journeymen.

Paying Your Dues

As does any other professional organization, your union has dues that you must pay. You will begin paying dues once you become a member of the union.

Your dues will help fund local union salaries, buildings, and expenses, keeping the union in force and active on local, national, and international levels. It is the union that assures you a higher wage and more fringe benefits than you would have as a nonunion worker. Because of the union, you will be paid union scale, not just what some employer might be willing to pay you.

Whether you are an apprentice or journeyman, the union is your marketing agent - finding you jobs and placing you in assignments appropriate to your individual skills and interests. Union dues are an investment in your career and in your lifelong security. They are money's well spent.

While the cost of union dues varies from local to local, the consequences of failing to pay dues are similar. If you become delinquent in your payments, you can be dropped from the apprenticeship program, although your obligation to the terms of the scholarship-loan agreement would remain in full force.

Collective Bargaining and Union Contracts

The most important moment in labor history came when workers gained the right to collective bargaining.

Under collective bargaining, representatives of employers and employees meet to determine contracts and to define rules for hiring, firing, and promoting workers. They also adopt standards of safety, establish regulations for overtime and sick time, and provide for health insurance and retirement benefits.

Among other committees, your local union affiliate supports a bargaining team that meets with representatives of local contractors to bargain collectively in developing an agreement that defines local wages, benefits, and working conditions. Your local manages the union contract and helps employees with managerial problems, disputes, and other issues.

Union contractors have formed their own organization, which allows them to work together to promote the quality of union construction jobs, resist inroads by non-union

