
Why Union Contracts Matter

The differences between a workplace governed by a union contract and one that isn't are clear. The advantages demonstrate the real-world value of the power workers have to create workplaces that work for them.

With a UNION Contract	Without a Contract
Your wages, benefits, and working conditions are protected by an enforceable contract.	Management can change wages, benefits, and working conditions whenever they want.
The contract spells out how much everyone earns.	No one else knows how much anyone else earns.
The union negotiates raises for everyone. The members vote on the settlement. If they think that it is not a fair settlement, they can vote it down.	If you want a raise, you have to beg for it or kiss up to the boss.
If you are disciplined for something you didn't do, the union will fight back alongside you.	If you are disciplined for something you didn't do, you're on your own.
If you do a good job and are in line for a promotion, you will have a fair shot at getting it.	Promotions can be handed out on any basis—friendship, loyalty, or favoritism.
If you don't like something at work, you can build power to change it.	If you don't like something at work, you can quit.
Vacations, shifts, and layoffs are based on seniority.	Vacations, shifts, layoffs are up to the boss

Learning the Contract

A contract spells out the terms and conditions of employment for a specified group of workers (legally defined as the “bargaining unit”—check the first few paragraphs of your contract to see who is listed as covered by your contract). Items often spelled out in a contract include but are not limited to wages, benefits, work hours, leave time, health and safety, seniority rights, and formal procedures for resolving problems (grievances) in the workplace.

As a steward, it's important for you to familiarize yourself with the contract as well as other work rules, policies, and procedures that might direct management's behavior such as the company code of conduct. The contract, however, is where you should start.