Frequently Asked Questions

What is a union?
A union is a group of employees in which a majority decide to bargain collectively to try to improve wages, benefits and working conditions. They can exercise their legal rights to do this independently or with the help of an established labor organization.

How do you form a union?
Basically, you sign a "union card" (a card that indicates that you would like to form a union at your workplace). If a majority of employees sign such a card, the cards are given to a government agency (for most workers, that's the NLRB - The National Labor Relations Board) which then schedules and oversees a secret ballot election to see if the employees really do want a union. If a majority votes "Yes" then a union is formed, with which the company must bargain over wages, benefits and working conditions. See also How to Unionize.

What does a union do?
The primary objective of a union is to secure a contract which spells out the wages, benefits and working conditions for employees. Once a contract is signed by the employer and ratified by the employees, the union then exists to help any employee who wants such help to solve problems with management. This is done through the grievance procedure.

The... what?
The grievance procedure is a procedure spelled out in the contract that explains how any conflicts between employees and management is to be resolved. Basically, it works as follows: Let's say you've been written up for something and you feel it isn't fair. You talk with your managers but they refuse to do anything about it. You then go to your shop steward (see below) to get help. The steward sits down with you and management and tries to resolve the issue. If it can't be resolved at this meeting, a business agent for the union (see below) will come in to talk with management. If they still cannot resolve the problem to everyone's satisfaction, the business agent will appeal to upper management. If this step fails, both parties will bring in a neutral arbitrator who will issue a final and binding decision.

What's a shop steward and a business agent?
A shop steward is simply a coworker that is elected by you to make sure that the contract isn't violated. In addition, s/he is the person to contact when an employee has a problem with management and wants union help. A business agent is an official of the union that handles any problems the shop steward cannot.
What besides the grievance procedure goes into a contract?
See What goes in a contract?

Who negotiates the contract?
The company and the union put teams together. The company's team is usually comprised of lawyers, local management and upper management officials. The union team usually consists of bargaining unit (see below) employees, lawyers, and union negotiators.

What kind of say do I get in the contract?
Before contract talks, the union will usually survey the members to get a list of those things you'd like to see in a contract. The union uses this to base the negotiation on. Furthermore, you could be on the negotiating team, but at the very least you get to vote on the contract. If a majority doesn't approve of the contract, the negotiating team has to go back to the bargaining table.

How long do contracts last?
Like everything else, that's negotiable too; typically, from 3 to 5 years.

What's this "bargaining unit" thing I've heard about?
The bargaining unit defines which employees are eligible to vote for and be in the union. Excluded by federal law are managers and security guards.

Why are unions important?
There are lots of advantages to union representation. And people's reasons for joining can be very different. The truth is, most people join unions to protect themselves from management's unfair, arbitrary or even malicious behavior. See also Why People Join Unions.

What are union dues? What are they used for?
Union dues are the money you pay to the union to help pay for union support staff, legal costs, negotiation costs, arbitrator's fees, etc. Dues can range anywhere from $200-$500 a year depending on the industry, the union, and the amount of money the union members make.

What's a "union shop"?
This means that all employees in the bargaining unit (see above) must be a part of the union or at least pay their fair share to the union for representation services. It's a standard part of most contracts. It enables the union to bargain from a stronger position, which benefits all employees.

Even if they voted against the union? Is that fair?
Well, for better or worse, it's how democracy in our country works. What the majority votes for, the minority has to live with. Is it unfair that Dole supporters have
to live with Clinton as president? And remember, even those who opposed the union receive all the protections and rights of the contract including any increases in wages and/or benefits. Would it be fair for them to be "free riders"?

**What's a "local"?**
A union is set up kind of like the United States. There is a national government, but many of the decisions that really affect you are on the state level. This is even more true of a union. There is an international union that oversees national operations. But the local takes care of the contract, helps employees that want help with managerial problems, etc.

**So, what's this "International" do?**
They lobby Congress for changes in laws that would benefit workers, send help to any locals that need it, coordinate national organizing efforts, etc.

**Can you give me a better idea of what will happen during a union drive?**
You'll be asked at some point to sign a union card. Once about 65-75% of the employees in the bargaining unit are signed up (legally, you could file with as few as 30% of employees signed up, but it's best to wait for a solid majority), the cards are submitted to the NLRB. (The National Labor Relations Board, the government agency that oversees union/management relations.) The bargaining unit (see above) is finalized either by the NLRB or by agreement between the company and union. An election date is set. The secret ballot election is held and a majority wins. Of course, during the few weeks before the election, both management and pro-union employees will try to disseminate information. Management will do this through mandatory meetings and memos in your mailboxes. Pro-union employees will try to get you to talk with them about concerns, hold voluntary meetings and may mail stuff to your home. Tensions may start to run high, but the best way to avoid this is by feeling free to talk with your coworkers about your concerns.

**How democratic are unions?**
The whole process is democratic. You get to decide if you want to sign a card. You decide to vote yes or no for union representation. You decide what you want in a contract. You decide which employees will be on the negotiating team. You vote to ratify the contract or not. You vote on who will be your shop steward. Every 3 years you vote on who will be the officials of the local.

**What if I have more questions?** Feel free to ask around. Ask both pro-union folk and management. Both would love to answer your questions. Stop by a unionized workspace (ask a pro-union person to get you a list or ask a union organizer where such a store is) and talk to the employees there. See what they think of their union.
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