

Your rights at Work

Union Series

What is a union?

A union is a group of workers coming together in an organisation which aims to protect working terms and conditions, advance the position of workers, promote solidarity, equality and a safe working environment. The aim is to create a national culture of rights in employment and your trade union representative can ensure you are part of this culture.

The aim is to give you the benefit of being a member where relations between employees and employers; employees and employees and employers and employers (where it affects workers) is monitored all the time.

Unions are the only organisations whose sole function is to protect and represent workers.

Who are Unions for?

Unions are for all types of worker. Every worker is entitled, under the Irish Constitution, to join a union regardless of

their type of employment or the views of their employer.

I don't know anything about unions, how do they work?

A union is structured to give a voice to every member. It is usually composed of sections or branches which meet regularly to discuss issues related to the workplace.

Members can attend these meetings which provide everyone with the opportunity to contribute to the debate and discussions and raise workplace issues.

The members of each workplace also get the opportunity to vote for their workplace representative or shop steward, through annual elections. Any member can put themselves forward for election. A representative represents their colleagues in discussions with management and inputs their views to the national union.

Why should I join a union?

Unfortunately, real injustices can happen in the workplace, therefore, it is in your interest to join a union. A union not only gives you a voice but also provides you with information, support and assistance. Union shop stewards elected by members, or union officials appointed by the union, will be able

to assist you, provide you with advice and initiate the process to resolve any problems.

As an individual you have very little influence on your employer, but as a group your bargaining power is greatly increased. A union is organised on a collective basis which is crucial to the success of negotiations in the workplace. Strength truly is in numbers.

Being a member means that you will have full access to advice, support and information on all workplace issues which are relevant to you.

Unions enable workers to have their voice heard in the workplace and build strength to protect terms and conditions.

What have unions done for workers?

The lives of all workers have improved due to the contribution of unions in Ireland. The Union movement in Ireland is now in its third century and it is clear the formula works.

Most of the conditions which we enjoy today were fought for and won by unions. Holidays with pay, sick pay, the minimum wage, the maximum working week, protecting workers health & safety and establishing maternity protection were unheard of in the workplace before unions put them on the agenda.

Unions are a major influence in shaping employment law through their participation in the political sphere at Irish and European level.

What unions do?

The core activities of unions include representing workers' concerns, negotiating new and improved working conditions, protecting existing rights and entitlements and promoting a safe, discrimination-free and just workplace. Unions are also involved in:

- Policy development
- Campaigns
- Partnership
- Union learning & training

What will I gain by becoming a union member?

Your existing workplace rights and conditions will be protected through the collective strength of a union.

There are many other benefits of union membership which include:

- Unionised workplaces tend to have better pay, more holidays, increased access to training and education
- You are less likely to be injured at work, discriminated against or sacked
- You are more likely to get equal pay
- Representation at work for both individual and group issues
- Support and advice on workplace issues such as health & safety, discrimination, flexible working, leave entitlements and victimisation.
- Employment and workplace advice in areas such as pensions, redundancy etc.

→ **Employee representation:**

- representing members fairly and effectively.
- participating in negotiation and grievance procedures as provided for in union agreements;
- co-operating with the management of the undertaking or establishment in ensuring proper implementation and observance of the agreements undertaken;
- acting in line with existing laws ;
- having regard to the safe operation of the establishment.

Individual unions may also have additional benefits for their members such as:

- Member discounts on house & car insurance, holidays
- Access to legal advice
- Free “make a will” service
- Provision of educational scholarships

I am interested in becoming a member of a union, what should I do?

It is very easy to become a union member. You can join online at **www.unionconnect.ie** or by phone to **0818 300 900**. Just contact us and we will do the rest.

I have a problem in work where can I get advice?

If you are a member of a union you should contact your local representative or union official for advice, and/or representation.

If you are not a union member, you should seriously consider joining a union. For details on which union you may be eligible to join, please call UnionConnect at 0818 300 900.

I have a problem in work, how long does it take for a union to deal with my case?

Details of the protections afforded to union members, are outlined in the rulebook and constitution of each union.

In general you will have to be a full member for a period of time (specific to each union) before the union can deal with an issue on your behalf. Following this period, issues can be dealt with through the usual internal procedures by your union representatives.

My colleagues and I have problems at work, how do I get a union to take up our issues ?

For a union to take up a group or collective issue, it is crucial that all workers involved in the issue concerned should apply for or be in membership of a union. This ensures that there is agreement among all those affected by negotiations conducted on your behalf.

It is important that all your workplace colleagues join to ensure greater strength and unity. You should try to persuade your colleagues that it is in their interest to join a union.

To find out how to go about joining a union, call UnionConnect at 0818 300 900. It is also important to note that there is a waiting period after acceptance into membership before the union can deal with your issue.

I want to join a union but my employer says I am not allowed, is this correct?

No. All workers have an entitlement to join a union regardless of where they work or the views of their employer. This right is guaranteed in the Irish Constitution and it is serious if it is not complied with as it is considered a fundamental right.

You do not need permission from your employer to join a union and you also do not need to inform your employer of your membership, if you so choose.

If you have any problems or need clarification on this issue please contact UnionConnect @ 0818 300 900.

I am a union member but will be changing jobs soon, do I need to change my union?

It depends. If you are **remaining within a sector**, such as Retail or Communications, but are changing employer then there may be no reason to change your union. However, you should always inform your union of the details of your new employment to ensure they can continue to contact you into the future and you receive all correspondence.

If you are moving into a **new sector**, you can contact UnionConnect @ 0818 300 900 who will provide you with information regarding joining another union.

Where it is necessary to change unions, you will need to inform your current union of your resignation and the reasons for it before you will be eligible to be taken into full membership of a different union.

I want to join a union but am afraid of victimisation, what should I do?

One of the responsibilities of a union is to protect their members from victimisation.

Victimisation occurs where there is a dismissal or other adverse treatment of an employee by his or her employer. This would be a reaction to a complaint of discrimination or where you supported an employee who was discriminated against and you suffered as a result. It can arise if you represented an employee who was discriminated against or if you gave evidence on their behalf and your employer adversely treated you as a result.

Joining a union will help protect you against such actions. To join simply:

- ➔ Call in to your local union office and speak with an official who will give you advice on the best way to join.
- ➔ Speak with your co-workers and submit a group application returning it in the pre-paid envelope.
- ➔ Contact UnionConnect at 0818 300 900 for clarification.

LOG ON TO...

www.unionconnect.ie
for information on:

- ➔ employment rights
- ➔ union member case studies
- ➔ hot topics