



Frequently Asked Questions about Nonprofit Unions

What do unions have to do with me?

Coming together with your colleagues to form a union is about securing a voice at work and a seat at the table with your employer. A union brings together the collective strength of you and your coworkers to improve wages, benefits, workload, hiring, promotions, personnel policies, and other terms of your employment. A union gives you equal footing with your employer to negotiate a contract that preserves what you like about your workplace and improve what you don't. A union helps ensure professional dignity and respect in the workplace.

What is the Nonprofit Professional Employees Union (NPEU)?

NPEU is a union of professional staff at more than 30 nonprofit research and advocacy organizations in DC and across the country. Our members have established standards for fair and equal treatment of nonprofit professionals by negotiating contracts that improved pay, benefits, and working conditions. Our members include the National Women's Law Center, Center for American Progress, Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, and the National Immigration Law Center.

We strongly support the missions of our nonprofits and want our organizations to thrive. Our negotiated contracts put in place a process for workplace collaboration which creates better, more productive nonprofit organizations.

What is the International Federation of Professional and Technical Engineers (IFPTE)?

NPEU is a member of IFPTE, a professional union made up of autonomous local affiliates in the U.S. and Canada. IFPTE fights for the rights of more than 90,000 people in professional and technical occupations—in fields such as engineering, health care, science, research, and law. IFPTE represents members in the private, public, federal, and nonprofit sectors. Recently the ACLU of Northern California voted 98% UNION YES to join IFPTE (Local 20).

What does it mean to form a union?

All it takes to form a union is the support of a majority of non-managerial staff at your workplace. The process begins as staff work to share information, collect feedback, and build support among their coworkers for the union. Once a majority of staff have indicated their support for the



union (either by signing an authorization card or casting a vote), the union is formed and negotiations with the employer begin.

How does bargaining work?

Negotiations begin with current pay and benefits as the baseline. Members identify which issues are most important to them; areas that need improvement are often prioritized in bargaining. Negotiations can include anything that affects the conditions of your employment. NPEU members have negotiated for:

- Salary and promotion policies
- Health care, retirement, and other benefits
- Vacation time, sick leave, paid family leave
- Hiring, firing, disciplinary, and promotion policies
- Telework, flex time, and overtime policies
- Policies to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion for staff based on race or ethnicity, gender, LGBTQ, and disability status
- Protections against harassment
- Staff representation in strategic decisions, including board participation
- Professional development, training, tuition reimbursement, and career ladders

Without the protections afforded by a union, including a negotiated union contract, management can change pay, benefits, and working conditions unilaterally. You've seen ACLU management do this repeatedly. The Communications Department layoffs of April 2019 were an example of unilateral decision-making. Workers arrived at work one day only to be told to go home, some with many years of tenure at the organization. Once a contract is negotiated and approved by a vote of membership, management is legally obligated to follow it.

How does the union work?

Your union is a democracy. Members have a voice in everything from electing union leaders (such as shop stewards, bargaining team members, and officers) to setting bargaining priorities and ratifying union contracts. Both NPEU and IFPTE have staff and resources to help our members achieve their collective goals as professionals, as well as help with training and strategy.

If we form a union, does that mean that I can't go directly to management with an issue?

You can continue to talk to your supervisor directly about issues at work, but your mileage may vary. NPEU can help you talk to management, but only when you ask for help. With your union, you will select coworkers who will be trained to represent you on the job if you want them to. If you feel you can get results from your supervisor without another voice in the room, nothing





stops you from doing so. But if you feel like you need support, you have the union to turn to. If management pretends you can't speak to them because you're a union member, that reflects poorly on them. All that shows is anti-union sentiment and bad faith on their part.

Having a fair process to resolve disputes is one of the most significant benefits of being in a union. For example, you may choose to include a specific process for resolving disputes in your union contract. Your local union steward will support you in this process and will bring in support from NPEU and IFPTE if needed.

What if my employer retaliates against me for joining a union?

The National Labor Relations Act (NLRA) protects your right to unionize and forbids management from retaliating against staff for joining a union or taking part in union activities. Of course, we all know that just because something is illegal doesn't mean it won't happen. But we also know that retaliation can happen to employees when they're not part of a union. Being in a union makes you part of a team that will be on your side if you do experience retaliation. NPEU, through our international union IFPTE, has expert legal counsel who will defend the rights of any worker who may have been punished for union activity.

To be on the safe side, take thorough notes of your interactions with supervisors after any conversations with them that involve your union. They can be useful should ACLU Staff United have to help you later on. Additionally, in New York [and many other states](#) it's legal to record conversations with supervisors. Phone apps like Voice Memo (iPhone) or Google Keep (Android) work well for this. Such a recording can be invaluable in resolving disputes over what was said, according to one member of the organizing committee who used to work for the National Labor Relations Board.

Will I have to strike if I am part of a union?

Strikes can be a powerful tool that should never be taken off the table, and decisions about strikes will always be made by you and your colleagues. However, NPEU always tries to solve disputes in a professional manner. In the 20-year history of NPEU, none of our bargaining units has ever needed to strike. A strike can only occur if an overwhelming majority of the members affected vote to approve it. NPEU or IFPTE can't force you to strike. That is a decision made by you and your coworkers.

How much are union dues? What do they pay for?

NPEU dues are 0.75% of pre-tax wages (a little over \$30/month for someone making \$50,000/year). Dues aren't collected until after the first contract is negotiated and ratified. All of our members pay dues through the standard direct deposit/payroll process at their workplace.





Union dues pay for:

- Membership to the Local (NPEU), the International (IFPTE), and the AFL-CIO
- Access to legal, training, bargaining, and support services from the Local and International
- Access to NPEU events and annual meetings
- Discretionary funds for events and solidarity activities
- Assistance if your employer violates your union contract

Am I allowed to talk about the union or to union staff at work? Is my manager allowed to talk to me about it?

Yes, you have the right to talk about the union at work just as you could talk about the last movie you saw or what was for dinner last night. You also have the right to communicate with union representatives if it does not interfere with your work time. Before the union asks management for recognition, however, we're trying to get as many people on board as we can before approaching management, so during this time it's best that you not talk with your coworkers about unionizing on company time or using company resources. For example, use your personal email and phone number instead of your work email and phone, or use the union's Zoom account instead of your work Zoom account -- just ask if you need us to set up a Zoom for you.

Management is prohibited from asking you about your union support or activities in a manner that discourages you from engaging in that union activity. You can read more about this in some of our other information guides:

- [Tips for Speaking with Your Supervisor](#)
- [Union Busting 101: Common Scare Tactics](#)

Additional Resources

- [Workplace Fairness: Unions & Collective Action](#) has some more detailed information about labor law and your rights.
- [About NPEU](#) provides detailed information on our union, organizations where NPEU has bargaining units, and NPEU's structure.
- [ACLU: Collective Bargaining and Civil Liberties](#) explains the ACLU's long history of supporting organized labor.

