

# WHY UNIONS?



Sponsored by:  
The AFL-CIO  
Centra! New York  
Labor Council

In recognition of  
International Human Rights Day  
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## Introduction

The American Promise is that if we go to school, work hard and become a productive and faithful employee, we can then expect to support a family, raise and educate our children, enjoy a healthy and fulfilling life and retire with dignity.

We weren't supposed to have to win the lottery, be a corporate executive or possess a rare technical skill to enjoy the American Dream.

That was the vision of middle class Americans, who once modeled the image of what it was to be an American.

The middle class is disappearing in direct proportion to the demise of the American union movement. After World War II, nearly 30 percent of our workforce belonged to unions. Today, barely half that are organized. Today, a few own the world's resources while most live in poverty.

In Oneida County, a single adult with an infant and a preschooler needs \$15 per hour. In a family with two adults, an infant, a preschooler and a school-age child, *each* adult must earn at least \$11 per hour for the family to be self-sufficient. The minimum wage in NY State is \$6. Wages of \$8 per hour are common. For most there is no health insurance or retirement. The result? Taxpayers across the United States are

making up for what employers should be paying with public assistance programs. That's corporate welfare.

Why are wages so low? Because that's the easiest way to increase profitability. The result? Today, the wealthiest one percent own as much of our Nation as ninety percent of the rest of us. Corporate CEOs can earn 500 times the wages paid their workers.

### **Why Unions?**

The freedom to form unions is a basic human right. In 1935 the U.S. government enacted the National Labor Relations Act that said, "**Employees shall have the right to form...labor organizations...to bargain collectively... (and employers may not) interfere with...the exercise of...this right.**" In 1948, the U.S. joined four-fifths of United Nations member states to ratify the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which included the right of all people to come together in unions.

Workers form unions because there is power in numbers. Where unions are strong, employers must bargain collectively to set the terms and conditions of employment. The demand for profits must then be compromised with fairness toward workers.

### **How Employers Prevent Unions?**

When American workers seek to exercise the right to form a union, they nearly always run into a buzz saw of employer threats, intimidation and coercion such as:

- Captive audience meetings
- One-on-one meetings with supervisors
- Threats to close or move the workplace if workers vote to unionize
- Hiring professional consultants (union-busters) to coordinate anti-worker campaigns and
- Firing workers for union activity.

According to Human Rights Watch, the treatment of workers by employers and the failure of the U.S. government to prevent it constitutes a serious violation of human rights. Their report says, "Many workers...are spied on, harassed, pressured, threatened, suspended, fired, deported or otherwise victimized in reprisal for their exercise of the right to choose a union."

The consequences have been devastating for all of American society. When collective bargaining is suppressed, wages lag, inequality and poverty grow, race and gender pay gaps widen, society's safety net is strained and civic and political participation are undermined.

### **What Have Unions Done For Us?**

8-hour day	5-day work week
Health insurance	Good pensions
Paid sick leave	Higher Wages
Fair Treatment for women, people of color and those with disabilities.	
Overtime pay	Job Safety
Paid Holidays	Job Security
Severance Pay	Paid Vacations
Family and Medical Leave	

Union members earn 28 percent more than nonunion workers. But stronger unions raise living standards and improve the quality of life for everyone. In the 10 states in which unions are strongest, there is less poverty, higher household income, more education spending, better public policy than in the 10 states where unions are weakest.

### **Unions Encourage Democracy**

Unions encourage voting and other forms of political participation by members and other social groups with common interests. Political Scientist Benjamin Radcliff has estimated that for every 1 percent decline in union membership there is a 0.4 percent decline in voter participation.

**For Help in Forming a Union or For  
Additional Information:**

Call or write to:

**AFL-CIO**  
**Central New York Labor Council**  
270 Genesee Street  
Utica, NY 13502  
(315) 735-6101

The Central Labor Council represents 32 affiliated union locals with a combined membership of nineteen thousand working men and women in Oneida and Herkimer Counties.

