



## **Myths and Misinformation**

### **How to answer some concerns when organizing.**

We've all run into it. We're out talking to our fellow employees about joining our union, and they say something like, "Unions make things worse by protecting the bad employees!", or "What's in it for me? What's the union going to do for me?" Are you ready to respond to questions like that?

Here are some common questions expressing common myths and misconceptions about unions. This, of course, cannot be an exhaustive list of such questions, but I hope that the responses and insights offered here will help you in moving non-members toward joining us in the struggle for workplace and social justice.

- [1] **"Unions make things worse by protecting the bad employees!":** This is a commonly heard statement. It emerges from a misconception. It is not that unions by their nature protect the bad, or incompetent employee, but rather that unions seek to uphold and act on the principle of due process. Everybody should have a right to a fair hearing and a fair judgment of their actions. Just as we have the principle in our criminal courts of "innocent until proven guilty", in the workplace it should not be enough to simply accuse or allege bad behavior or incompetence of somebody to terminate their employment. Unions stand for fairness and for proper application of due process. If processes are followed correctly without bias and the process reveals that an employee is indeed engaged in bad, criminal or incompetent behavior, and if remediation has been tried and failed, unions do not stand in the way of the termination of such employees. Union members strive to ensure that their work is of the highest quality and ethical standard, and so will not tolerate behavior that erodes the public's trust or that undermines our principles. And one of the principles that we hold most dear is that every employee deserves fairness and the proper application of due process.
- [2] **"What's in it for me? What's the union going to do for me?":** This statement grows out of what we can refer to as the *transactional model* of the relationship between a local and a member. In this model, each member sees himself as a sort of client or customer who must pay a fee and can demand a service. For example, an employee is treated unfairly and makes a complaint to their union representative who then goes to remedy the situation with the employee's supervisor. This model puts the burden of action on the local's leadership and creates in the membership a sense they can be passive because union leadership will do all the work. The transactional model undermines the power and effectiveness of unions. Unions are strong when members see themselves as activists, acting in concert and collectively, to effect change. The question should not be "What's the union going to do for me?" but rather "what can I do with my union sisters and brothers to make life better for everybody?" We can call that the *relational model*. We come together to counteract the efforts

of management who favor an environment in which we are pitted against each other, each competing against all others, which strengthens their hand and weakens ours. Our union promotes bonds of collegiality and cooperation to make our voices and concerns heard. Our union is an opportunity for working people to come together to improve the conditions in which we must work.

[3] **“We may have needed unions in the past, but there are laws now that protect workers.”:** Most of us are aware of how the efforts of union organizers and activists during the 20<sup>th</sup> century resulted in the passage of laws to protect workers both from dangerous conditions and economic abuses, but laws are carved in stone. Just as laws are enacted, they can be reversed or weakened. Almost from the moment that laws meant to protect workers were enacted, corporate and wealthy interests have worked diligently to undermine them. We like to believe as Americans that we have various rights (free speech, free association, free press, free movement or the one enshrined in the principle “innocent until proven guilty”) but we must remind ourselves that in most workplaces such rights do not necessarily exist. Workers’ rights are in a growing jeopardy today. Changes in law, such as Act10 here in Wisconsin, have placed in the employer’s hands a great deal of power to decide the conditions in which employees work, and made it more difficult for employees to protect themselves against the arbitrary decisions of management. Currently, in the midst of a deadly pandemic, when the law may protect employers who flout proper public health measures, union members are standing up to force those employers to take the proper measures to protect people. The law is very often an instrument that benefits the wealthy and protects corporate power. Unions were important in improving the lives of workers in the 1920s but they remain just as important in the 2020s.

[4] **“I’m a good employee. I do my work and get good evaluations. I don’t need the union.”:** This statement is variation on statement #1 given above. “I’m a good employee. I don’t make trouble”, an employee thinks to herself, “I won’t get laid off.” But, of course, history tells us something different. Institutions like the college make hiring and firing decision based largely on reasons having to do with the budget not with an employee’s loyalty, commitment, expertise or service. No matter how good an employee’s work or evaluation may be – perhaps they were known and loved by all other employees for the commitment they brought to the work; perhaps they served the institution with loyalty for decades - if the institution closes the office, department or service that that employee works in, they will lose their job. What happens if an employee is injured? Without the protection afforded by union solidarity, their continued employment could be threatened. What happens if a personal animosity grows between employee and a supervisor? Without the protection of union solidarity, they may be terminated on a false charge of insubordination. As stated for statement #1, the value and strength of our union is in its collective insistence on fair due process. It seems like a tautology (like a circular statement) but you don’t need your union until you need your union, and so we are all better off maintaining our union’s collective strength so that it is there when it is called for.

[5] **“Unions should concentrate on workplace issues and stay out of politics. I don’t like that dues money gets used in political activity.”:** We humans tend to compartmentalize, that is, we like to separate one sphere of activity and thought from other spheres of activity and thought. There is a misconception that because unions are properly concerned about workplace issues like pay, benefits and work safety, that the focus of work that unions do should be restricted to the workplace. But that sort of thinking misses the fact that issues such as pay, benefits and safety are directly shaped and structured by laws, policies and ordinances passed and enforced by local, state and federal government. Corporations and employers spend millions of dollars every year to affect the wording of laws such that they benefit the corporations and the employers in the making of profit – even if

that profit taking results in lower pay and benefits for workers, a weakening or absence of workplace safety regulations, the pollution of the environment, and the erosion or loss of pension programs. In fact, the millions of dollars spent every year affecting the shape of labor and environmental law could be spent to improve the conditions in which people must work, but the protection of profit is seen as more important. The political action that all unions take part in is necessary. Our actions as union members are an effort to act as a counter-weight to the power and greed of the wealthy and corporate interests. Our unions are involved in political activities because the issues of pay, benefit and work conditions are not separate from the world of political but part and parcel of it. In a world where reality is defined in terms of balanced budgets, the humanity of employees is always threatened. Union members engage in political action because employees should not be reduced to being mere instruments in the process of making profit and balancing budgets.

**[6] “Unions are ineffective. If unions are effective, they’d be growing.”:** There is actually a growing interest among many people in creating and joining unions. Historically, it was the concerted work of union members that resulted in such things as the weekend, the eight-hour day, health benefits, workers compensation measures, fair overtime pay, even the social security system that we take for granted today. Unions are indeed effective in protecting the rights of workers and their families, but many people may have heard differently. Instead they hear about the corruption of unions and union leaders, that some are “mobbed up” or associated with organized crime, or that unions protect the lazy, foster incompetence and drive up costs through their constant demand for higher pay and benefits. These images are mischaracterizations fostered by the corporations that benefit by weakening and delegitimizing unions and that either themselves own or are associated with media outlets that broadcast these untruths. In the last few decades, unions have taken a media battering but are still standing, and without them, it is most likely that workers’ pay, benefit, safety and rights would be more severely eroded than they presently are.



Our unions, like all unions, are groups of people coming together for the common cause of upholding the dignity of working people, to improve work conditions and to press toward a more just society for all. Like all groups made up of people, unions are shaped by the strengths and weaknesses, the virtues and foibles of the people who make them up, and so unions are imperfect. Imperfect as they may be, unions are and have been the only organizations in society committed to the well-being of working people.

To join us in the struggle for a better world for all, go to:

<https://join.aft.org/form/madison-area-technical-college/local/00243/madison-area-technical-college-union-local-243>

For more information, email one of us at AFT Local 243:



Luke Matthews, President – [aft243prez@gmail.com](mailto:aft243prez@gmail.com)

Carola Pfortner, Organizing Chair – [carolapf@aol.com](mailto:carolapf@aol.com)

Jo Zander, Vice President PSRP chapter - [psrpvp243@gmail.com](mailto:psrpvp243@gmail.com)

Jimmy De Gidio, Vice President, Full-Time Faculty chapter – [jdegidio1@gmail.com](mailto:jdegidio1@gmail.com)

Melissa Brainerd, Secretary-Treasurer – [staft243@gmail.com](mailto:staft243@gmail.com)