

Past and Present: How Unions Inspire, Lead & Create Change
The Role Union Members Play as a Positive Force in the Community
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Imagine your child going to work in a dirty, dangerous and architecturally unsound factory because, although you work a 40-hour workweek, you only make a few dollars a day. Imagine getting hurt at work one day and having no healthcare, insurance or workers' compensation to help cover the bills. Without unions, those nightmares might have been a reality.

When unions first began, their purpose was to fight against giant corporations who wanted to take advantage of their workers. Today, union members still stand up against companies and fight for their rights. A large corporation should not be stronger than the people who drive the company, and the safety and well being of the workers should always come before profits. Thanks to unions, there are child labor laws so your child isn't allowed to work in a factory, and there are minimum wage laws, so that one won't have to go to extreme measures to provide a living for their family. But even as I talk about minimum wage laws, I realize the fight for a living wage is far from over, which is one of the ways that unions are actively working for positive change today.

Union members play a critical role as an influential force in the community. Union members have a voice. When a group speaks out together, change will occur. Unions strengthen the community by, but not limited to, fair rights for workers, healthcare, job security, and promoting democracy. The positive effects caused by union workers are both visible and invisible. Union workers coming together to raise money or collect toys for a toy drive show the deep bonds of workers within the union, and their commitment to the betterment of their community. They also collect school supplies for disadvantaged students. Union workers volunteer with Habitat for Humanity and help build "simple, decent and affordable" housing while addressing poverty. Union members mentor the younger generation by serving as a big brother or big sister. The way union

workers can inspire others to create change in their communities may not be as visible. Unions touch people's lives personally. Union X may be inspired to negotiate for better rights because Union Y did. When union workers advocate for themselves, they inspire others to do the same.

The fraternal bond shared by union members is one of selflessness and compassion to which all groups should aspire. When there is a disaster within the community or in the family of a union brother or sister, union members step up and take care of each other. They help provide food for the families or visit with the people affected. When a flood or tornado occurs, union members are the first ones on the scene to lend assistance.

Union members not only touch their community, but also impact their country. A vast number of union members are active in politics and perform their civic duties, which is another example of how union members are leaders in the community and set positive examples for their fellow countrymen and the younger generation. Union members have also been elected to congress and worked to pass bills to improve working conditions for all workers. What union members do on small and large scales alike comes back to affect their communities. As the saying goes, "all politics is local."

Union members are fighting different battles today than when they first began in the nineteenth century. Because of unions, we have luxuries such as breaks at work, an eight-hour workday, weekends without work (or with appropriate compensation), child labor laws, and a minimum wage. Because of this, unions have made positive impacts on everyone's lives. Today, union members are actively fighting on the front of equality in the workplace. Labor Unions made the Equal Pay Acts of 1963 and 2011 a reality, which means employers must pay men and women equally for performing the same job. Unions are also fighting against discrimination in the workplace.

This local union is currently running a food campaign to help benefit our hungry neighbors. During April and May, IBEW 21 is running 21 days of Giving Food Drive for the Feeding America food banks in Illinois and Indiana. At the last union meeting, my dad donated to this cause. Last Saturday, I spent three hours at the Northern Illinois food bank for the first time as a part of my high school's Leo's Club, a youth version of the Lion's Club. I was astounded to find out that the Northern Illinois food bank, which is a member of Feeding America, distributes food to more than 71,000 hungry neighbors every week. Food banks are run on volunteers. Without devoted groups of people, work would go undone and people could go hungry. There is no better way to directly support your community than by giving time or money to the food bank that puts food in working peoples' pantries when they're torn between paying the utility bills or feeding their family.

The first Monday in September is Labor Day - a national holiday and another gift to us from unions. This holiday celebrates the hard work and achievements of the working class and the labor movement. Union members do so much more than provide quality service through their trade. They are community servants with unquenchable thirsts to better the community. They run drives to collect necessities for schools and neighbors, such as food, clothing and supplies. They make Christmas magic a reality by providing toys for children in low-income families. They provide scholarships, which help make higher education a reality for deserving students. They are community leaders and trailblazers. Power to the working men - and women - who have done so much for so many. And thank you to unions and union members everywhere, past and present, for inspiring us all to stand up for ourselves, our communities, and always be a positive force for good.