

How Does a Strong Union Affect My Family?

Unions have been a part of my family for as long as I can remember. They've allowed both of my parents to provide my brother, sister, and I with all that we have today. When I was a child, the union, in my mind, was an emblem my dad wore proudly on his shirts and hats. It was the sticker on his lunch box and the bumper sticker on his car. The union meant that we went to a terrific Christmas party in December. We wore our Christmas sweaters and every kid got a gift! We got to drink hot cocoa and eat donuts, lots of donuts, while we watched a magic show. Afterwards, we drove around to see the Christmas lights. In the summer, we always went to the union picnic at Idlewild Park. We looked forward to riding the rides and playing in the Soak Zone. At lunchtime, all of the members and their families came back to the big pavillion to eat burgers, hot dogs and corn on the cob together. The union helped to make my childhood idyllic.

However, as I've grown both in age and maturity, I can see that unions have provided so much more, not only for my family, but for so many other families around the world. The I.B.E.W. (International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers) has provided a stable, well-paying job with health benefits and retirement to my father as an electrician, and the NEA (National Education Association) and OEA (Ohio Education Association) has done the same for my mother, who is an instructor at a state university. In this way, unions have had a massively beneficial effect on my family and on my life as an individual.

My father was born in Boston, Massachusetts. He is the oldest of five kids and his life growing up was very different from mine. His parents worked hard, but they struggled to provide for their family. His father worked in a warehouse and was not a part of a union. Putting food on the table was difficult and his mother sewed all of their clothes. My dad enlisted in the United States Marine Corps. right out of high school in 1981. There wasn't money for him to go to college. He was an active duty Marine for five years. He is a decorated combat veteran, having served two combat tours, as part of the the United States invasion of Grenada in 1983 and then as a U.N. peacekeeper in Beirut, Lebanon where he nearly died when an enemy rocket propelled grenade hit his forward position. Becoming an electrician was a perfect fit for my dad because during his time in the Marines he trained as a combat radio operator and repairman. He was fortunate enough to enter the I.B.E.W. in 1992. He has been in the union for 27 years, and today, he is a full journeyman and takes great pride in his work every day.

For the majority of my childhood, my father's job was our family's only income. It put food on the table, gave us our home, medical care, and the ability to go to Catholic school. His hard work and the strength of the union provided for me, my mother, and my two older siblings. As I watched him go to work everyday, I saw the pride he had for his trade. When work got slow in our area, he had the ability to travel to different locals so that he could still provide for his family. To this day, he is the hardest worker I have ever known. The ability to provide for us means everything to him and it showed me that the union truly takes care of its members. He has always reminded us that the fact that he is in the union gives him piece of mind because he knows that he can care for his family in a way that his father, sadly, could not.

I'm the youngest child in our family, and my dad's union pay enabled my mom to stay home with us until after I started going to kindergarten. At that time, my mother returned to college and received her Masters degree in Business Administration. As she worked as a graduate assistant, she started to truly enjoy teaching in the college environment. This new found passion to help students find their way through college led to her become a full time instructor at Youngstown State University, the school she graduated from. She joined the faculty union at Youngstown State, which provides benefits similar to that of the I.B.E.W. with my father. In the same way that the I.B.E.W. helped my father stay employed, the teacher's union has helped to secure my mother's career and ensure that she receives the pay and benefits that she deserves.

Through classes in school and my parent's explanations of unions, I came to understand that these organizations that allowed my family to succeed, were integral not only to our American dream, but to the dreams of so many people before us. Unions came about as a result of the industrial revolution in the late 1800s and the labor movement. During this time, companies needed more and more workers to man assembly lines and mills. They even went to the extent of hiring children to work long hours in sweatshops and factories. Poverty was rampant throughout industrialized nations. A demand for more products, lower prices, and higher profits led to excruciatingly low wages, inhumane work hours, and dangerous working conditions for workers. Thousands of workers died or were critically injured on the job, leaving them unable to provide for their families. At that point in history, the worker wasn't represented; they had no voice or protection. They were at the mercy of the factory owners. In response to these terrible conditions workers formed coalitions and organized strikes to draw attention to their situation and make clear their grievances. Workers died fighting for the right to organize

into unions. They used the attention they did receive to ask for higher wages, worker benefits, and better overall working conditions. It is because of their sacrifices that today we have a 40 hour work week, overtime pay, health benefits and pension plans. The standard of living Americans enjoy today is a result of unions and the labor movement that founded them.

The key factor that makes unions strong is the solidarity of the men and women that make them up and their contribution to the union. In order for everyone to prosper, everyone has to give a little. Take for example a strike during the industrial revolution or today, if workers ignored one another, crossed picket lines, and continued to work despite calls for change no change would occur. If workers today don't pay dues, the unions are not able to lobby for workplace regulations or push for benefits like retirement and health insurance. The word union means to be joined, and when a group of individuals join together they are much stronger than one individual. Together they can achieve much more.

In my own life, strong unions secured higher pay and benefits for my parents. Those benefits and the security they provide have allowed my siblings and I to do well in school, and to move on to college; this is an opportunity my father and his father before him never had. As I've gained an interest in how our government works, the benefits of unions have grown clearer. I recognize how important they are in our modern society. Just as it was during the industrial revolution, corporate greed is a massive issue today. Companies are always looking to maximize profits and minimize expenses by cutting labor costs. The American dream is now in danger because the number of union members has declined. Unions in today's society still serve the vital purpose they did in the past, but many people have lost sight of how important they are. They protect our middle class. Unions advocate for the workers of the world and give them a voice

without having to fear being fired or discriminated against. Unions work to give us all the quality of life we've become accustomed to and strive to improve it even more. Today, we see declining wages amongst workers while large corporations generate sky-high profits. Each year, the middle class gets smaller and smaller while the rich get richer. Inequality is growing, much as it was during the industrial revolution. Americans must recognize the critical role of unions and elect representatives who support and strengthen them.

As I reflect on my upbringing, I am deeply grateful that I have been raised in a proud union family. Unions have helped to shape my own outlook on the world and fueled my desire to help the little guys, working families. I plan to pursue a career in which I advocate for the working class and can lessen inequality for all people.