

How does a strong union affect my family and me?

On the last day of summer vacation going into fifth grade, my dad took me to one of his union's meetings. Nine-year old me whined throughout the car ride, upset that my last day of summer would be "ruined". *How could my dad do this to me?* I thought. *Can't I go to the pool instead?* I sat in boredom the rest of the day, failing to appreciate the content of the meeting.

Union functions weren't anything new to me, though. My whole life, I've gone to them with my dad, a firefighter of 20 years and Vice President of his union. In fact, now I realize that they are one of the most prevalent experiences of my life.

I've walked in the Pittsburgh Labor Day Parade, strolling hand in hand with my dad or sitting atop his shoulders, not fully grasping the magnitude of what I was doing. At the time, what mattered to me were the thousands of people that were lined up to watch the parade and the subsequent donut eating that would occur after I finished marching.

I've spent time in the fire station, laughing with my dad as he gave me tours of the firehouse and showed me all of the giant fire trucks, with wheels as tall as me.

But most of all, I've attended union meetings. Through these meetings, I've heard about issues that affected real people, blue-collar individuals who've worked hard their whole lives. The men and women at each meeting that I attend would face the risk of losing their retirements or rights at any time, had they not had a strong union. Over the years, my values and interests were shaped by what I've witnessed and learned in union meetings.

My upbringing was paved with blue-collar memories. Back then, I didn't understand the importance of it all. Now, I've learned to appreciate the essential role that unions play in my life and the lives of millions of other people.

My parents grew up in impoverished and crime-stricken housing projects of western Pennsylvania. They knew what going to bed with an empty stomach was like. They wore hand-me-down clothes and shoes with holes in them.

I often look at myself in the mirror and wonder: *How did I get here? How did I get so lucky?* My parents came from poverty, yet I've never had to face it. I've never had to struggle. I've never worried about being hungry or having tattered clothes. Because my dad chose to pursue a union job, he was able to have a well-paying job to support our family. My parents' difficult childhoods didn't stop them from accomplishing great things, though. My dad enlisted in the Marines, in order to escape his rough and tumble upbringing. He found a job as a firefighter so

that he could provide me with a stable, middle-class life. More than anything, he wanted me to grow up in an environment that provided more than what he or my mom were ever given. A strong union enabled my parents and me to live in a safe area with ample resources and opportunities.

My dad often smiles and waves at me while sitting in the pool bleachers. Every single event that I have, he's there. Swim or cross-country meets, mock trial competitions, and National Honor Society inductions, are always accompanied by his smiling face in the crowd. Often times, my friends aren't always so lucky to find an excited parent in the stands, but I am. A strong union allows my dad to come to almost every one of my events. Having adequate time off, he never has to worry about being stuck in the office or bringing his work home. Instead, my mom and I have the opportunity to spend time with him. My dad is an active member of my life, unlike the parents of many of my friends and classmates.

When I was little, my mom and dad never had to worry about finding a babysitter to take care of me. Instead, with the constant and regular schedule that my dad has of working every three days, my mom was able to schedule the days she worked around my dad's schedule. I always had, and still have, a parent off with me on any given day of the week. Now, with my rapidly increasing schedule, this is especially beneficial.

At numerous family gatherings, I see the drastically different lives' of my aunts and uncles, compared to my parents and myself. My dad is the second youngest child in his family, yet he is fortunate enough to be the first to retire. On the other hand, the rest of my family must work until their mid-60s or even longer because they do not have a retirement. The strong union that my dad is a part of allows him to retire early. The collective bargaining that he has done in the context of his workplace has given him a strong retirement with ample benefits. This means that he will not have to worry about providing for my mom and me after he stops working.

In my freshman year, I was facing health problems that many doctors could not seem to pinpoint. I spent many days at the emergency room, getting different tests done, or going to neurology appointments. It was a terrifying experience, but one that was made easier with the help of unions. During that time, I was never in fear that my parents could not afford to take me to any of these, due to the health care plan that my dad has from his job. This could not have been accomplished without the tireless advocating that my dad and his fellow union members have done over the years. We live in a country where many are forced to live without health insurance. I am blessed to have this necessity guaranteed to my family. Any sprained ankle, ear infection, or stomach bug will always be treated, without the fear of extreme out of pocket expense.

This past year, I have had the privilege of visiting some of the top colleges and universities in the country. In August, I was able to go on a road trip with my dad to explore these options. His union contract allows him to take vacation days, days that he can spend helping me prepare for my future. Furthermore, with the rapidly increasing cost of college, I could not imagine being able to afford an education without the help of the wages that my dad has earned over his years of working as a firefighter. I know that I will be able to pursue higher education because my parents and I have the means to do so.

Unions are trailblazers in every sense of the word, paving the way for equality in the workplace. Though this does not deal directly with my family at the moment, my future family will be impacted if I choose to pursue a union job. As a young woman, the principle of “equal pay for equal work” is an issue that I am dedicated to making possible. Throughout the years, I have learned that unions feel the same way. Even if my future career does not offer a union, the strides that unions have made will keep sending ripples through the country, hopefully preventing future pay disparity.

Beyond most conventional benefits of a union, a strong union was beneficial in allowing me to discover what I am passionate for. Union meetings gave me a strong understanding of policy development and lobbying. My understanding of union processes were further impacted when my dad went to the Pennsylvania State Capitol in Harrisburg to fight for his fellow firefighters’ Cancer Presumption Rights. Not only was my dad working to protect my mom and me in the case of him developing cancer from years of carcinogens from firefighting, but striving to help thousands of other families. Seeing this made me realize that I am meant to serve more than just myself. I want to go into law, and someday, work with unions to preserve the rights of workers across the country. I feel that this is my way of giving back to unions for all they have done for my family and me.

Unions are one of the biggest parts of my identity. They will forever be a defining factor in who I am. My life has been tremendously improved by their benefits, my upbringing was uniquely shaped by being a union official’s daughter. Throughout my life, I’ve learned lessons of hard work from my dad and his union’s dedication to important issues. I’ve learned that nothing can be accomplished without a compromise in some form. But above all, I’ve learned to appreciate all of the small things that I would normally take for granted. So many things have been made possible because of a strong union’s role in my life. Had my dad never joined one of these amazing organizations, my life would be forever changed.