

## **WHAT CAN A TRADE UNION DO FOR ME?**

### **What is a trade union?**

Trade unions are independent, democratic organisations aimed at representing the interests of people at work and negotiating with employers for better terms and conditions for their members.

A trade union is an organised group of workers. Its main goal is to protect and advance the interests of its members.

A union often negotiates agreements with employers on pay and conditions. It may also provide legal and financial advice, sickness benefits and education facilities to its members.

### **What do unions do?**

Among the main services a union provides to its members are:

- Negotiation
- Representation on individual matters
- Information and advice
- Education and training
- Member services
- Legal assistance

### **What is trade union recognition?**

If a union is formally recognised by an employer, it can negotiate with the employer over terms and conditions. This is known as ‘collective bargaining’.

For collective bargaining to work, unions and employers will first put in place a written agreement known as a recognition agreement. This sets out in writing how both the union and the company will discuss issues that affect staff. They might, for example, make agreements providing for the deduction of union subscriptions from members’ wages, who can represent workers in negotiations and how often meetings will take place. Recognised unions also have rights to consultation where redundancies or a transfer of business are proposed.

Even if an employer does not formally recognise a trade union, an employee is still entitled to join a union and to have individual representation at disciplinary/ grievance meetings.

### **How democratic are trade unions?**

Trade unions are democratic organisations which are accountable to their members for their policies and actions. Trade unions are run by members, for members. Most major decisions are put to a ballot for the members to decide the course of action.

**Will I get in trouble if I join a trade union?**

You have a constitutional, legal right to join a trade union. Dismissal or harassment for trade union activity or membership is automatically unfair and an employee dismissed in such circumstances does not require any particular length of service in the job in order to enforce his/her rights.

**Will I be protected from discrimination in the workplace?**

Trade unions ensure employers comply fully with equality legislation and will support and represent members who are the victims of discrimination, harassment or bullying. All workers have the right to equal opportunities and treatment and have the right to dignity at work.

**What financial benefits are there to joining a union?**

Trade union members are, on average, better paid than non-union members (CSO National Employment Survey 2006). Trade unions negotiate with employers for better salaries and also campaign for equal pay for women and part-time workers.

Union members are much more likely to enjoy higher quality pension entitlements and in general enjoy better working conditions.

**What can a union offer with regard to working conditions and hours of work?**

Unions ensure employers comply with the Organisation of Working Time Act to secure adequate rest periods and leave for workers and can negotiate favourable terms for fair and flexible working hours, better pay for overtime and paid leave.

**What about job security?**

A trade union can protect you from arbitrary employer action and can represent you in the case of an unfair dismissal. When redundancies are threatened, members will find unions can provide invaluable help and assistance. They will understand your legal rights, and often be able to negotiate a deal much better than the legal minimum redundancy payments.

**Can I have representation for grievance/ disciplinary proceedings?**

A trade union will provide representation for grievance or disciplinary actions and can provide free legal services if required. This is an important service that ensures your rights are respected and that you benefit from the guidance and advice of an experienced trade union representative. Remember, you are entitled to trade union representation for grievance or disciplinary proceedings whether or not your employer recognises a trade union.

**What other benefits are there to joining?**

- Many unions use the size of their membership to negotiate favourable deals with diverse companies and services such as insurance, travel firms and retail discounts.
- Being a member of a trade union allows workers to have their voice heard and to get involved in the running of the workplace.
- Trade unions ensure that health and safety regulations are adhered to. All workers have the right to a safe and healthy work environment. Employees are entitled to select a Safety Representative to represent them on safety and

health matters with their employer. In order to maximise the effectiveness of our Safety Representatives, the CWU provides training courses which guarantee that they have the knowledge and expertise to carry out inspections at work.

- Trade unions campaign on a national level with government to improve the pay, terms and conditions of all workers. Rights we enjoy in Ireland due to the work of trade unions include:
  - Weekends
  - Paid holidays
  - Paid sick leave
  - The national minimum wage
  - Maternity leave
  - Health and safety legislation
  - Rights for working women...
  - and many more
- Unions provide financial assistance in the form of sickness/ personal accident benefits and various medical and distress funds to its members.
- There are a number of education and training services available to trade union members. Workers in unionised workplaces are also more likely to receive job-related training.
- Unions take on the bad employers, and work with the good to make them better.