



Thinking about unionizing your workplace? Here are the basics of what workers in Canada need to know.

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What is a union?

Although many of us have heard of unions, one of the many questions that surfaces for organizers is what exactly *is* a union, and how do you unionize?

A union is when a group of workers join together formally to collectively advocate for better working conditions. This involves negotiating their job contract with their employer through collective bargaining. Fair wages, benefits, safer working conditions, and job protection are among the many things that workers can fight for through their union.

In most cases, workers join an already established labour union in their respective industry or trade. Other workers choose to form an independent local union or join employee-associations, which are specific to designated professions.

Union organizing on the surface involves the procedural steps necessary for forming a union: from signing union membership applications to filing at the Labour Relations Board.

While these are the legal steps, union organizing represents so much more. It is a strategic plan of actions workers take to build majority support around a shared

vision for a unionized workplace. This involves building worker cohesion and creating demands around a vision for a better workplace.

Worker demands are negotiation points; they are the solutions to the issues identified by workers. Early on in the unionizing process themes will emerge around what workers want. It can be really powerful to share what other workers have achieved through unionization as a way to inspire workers to imagine the full range of possibilities beyond the strict confines of the workplace.

Who can unionize?

Most workers in Canada have the right to unionize their workplace and there are various options to actualizing this right despite management's best efforts to limit it.

Labour relations legislation sets out the terms for unionizing your workplace. However, certain categories of workers are ineligible to unionize, such as independent contractors.

If in doubt about your right to unionize, call a union.

Rules for card signing.

There is a minimum threshold of signed cards required by the provincial Labour Relations Board to unionize. The number varies by province. Some (like BC) follow a two-step process. The first step is to sign the designated number of union cards required to initiate a secret ballot vote which is the last step in the process. Other provinces have a process that, upon reaching the specified threshold, the union can petition the labour board for union certification without a secret ballot vote.

Industries that fall under federal jurisdiction have an automatic card check. In this case workers sign a membership card and pay a nominal fee to join the union.

A union organizer will be able to help you figure out whether your workplace falls under provincial or federal jurisdiction. In all cases, your employer never sees the signed cards. Only the union and the labour board see the signed cards.

Union drives — the process for unionizing.

The steps to forming a union may appear straightforward, but things can get complicated when management starts their anti-union campaign. Here are some practical things to consider when organizing your workplace:

Keep the unionizing process as quiet as possible, employers should not know.

Start with a few trusted people, with the intention to evolve and expand your organizing committee over the course of the union drive to ensure it represents the demographic of employees and the varied experiences in the workplace.

Contact and interview unions that represent workers in your industry or trade. Consider what is unique about your workplace. For example, are you contractual workers, newcomers, or does your workplace have multiple worksites? Look for a union that can support your unique circumstances. Here are a few questions to ask:

Once you choose a union, they will assign you an organizer to support your organizing drive and develop with the committee a strong campaign plan to unionize.

It is important to aim for 75% or higher of your co-workers to sign union cards. This is what is known as a “supermajority.” Not only does a supermajority ensure that you have the numbers to meet the minimum requirement to initiate a secret ballot vote (in provinces where that is required), it provides the assurance that a majority of workers will vote “yes” to unionizing.

Having one-on-one conversations with your coworkers is key to building union support. This step is all about listening and understanding what your coworkers care about. This can open with a simple question, such as “if there is one thing you

would change about your job what would that be?” It is important to note that these conversations should happen off company time during a break, or before or after work — not on work time.

Having a strategic get out the vote plan is necessary to win. It can be as simple as calling card-signers, reaffirming their support and the reasons why you are unionizing.

While this list is largely procedural and tactical, a truly successful campaign to unionize begins and ends with relationships, trust and solidarity. Your committee’s organizing efforts will lead to identifying patterns of systemic oppression in your workplace.

The committee will gain insights into the needs and wants of the workers most harmed. Leaders will begin to surface as they design, inform and invite more workers into the drive. They will have access to workers who will have their trust, understand their fears and represent their message. This builds a foundation of trust and solidarity which is needed to secure your first collective agreement.

Building Solidarity

It is important to recognize that not all workers experience the workplace and their communities the same way. Avoid taking a “colourblind” approach where social identities are erased and assumes that all workers are treated the same by employers.

This approach overlooks racism, sexism and other forms of oppression experienced by many workers. Management will seek to undermine union solidarity by exploiting the divisions or signs that the organizing committee is not speaking with a unified voice.

The end goal is not just to unionize — it is to negotiate a strong contract with the employer that reflects the needs and interests of the collective. Deep, meaningful and sustained victories come with a focus on relationship-building and an unwavering commitment to equity.