



A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION

UNION 101

**Understand your union.
Know where to turn.
Find your voice.**

Your starting point for understanding how unions work.

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Independently created by Jacob Beaulieu. General principles illustrated with PIPSC and federal public-service examples.

Not an official PIPSC publication; not formally reviewed by PIPSC.

A companion to the Union Ecosystem Atlas



Better work. Better lives. A stronger country.

Unions work together with members toward two core goals.



IMPROVE WORKING CONDITIONS

Fair treatment, safe workplaces and time for life beyond work.



STRENGTHEN PURCHASING POWER

Pay that supports a dignified standard of living.

These gains can help build:



BETTER LIVES

Greater financial security and more time.



STRONGER COMMUNITIES

More local spending, care, volunteering and shared talents.



A STRONGER COUNTRY

A healthier society and a more resilient economy.



The benefits of better work reach far beyond the workplace.

What does this mean for your job? →



Your job comes with more than a salary.

Your job includes many things that affect your daily life. These are called **“working conditions.”**



PAY

Your salary and how it increases.



HOURS OF WORK

Your work schedule, overtime and time off.



LEAVE

Vacation, sick leave and other types of leave.



BENEFITS

Health, dental, pension and other benefits.



JOB SECURITY

Protections around staffing and job changes.



A FAIR AND RESPECTFUL WORKPLACE

Rules and rights that support a safe and inclusive workplace.



These working conditions do not happen by accident.

They are the result of rules, policies, laws and negotiations — and your union plays a key role in shaping and protecting them.

So how does a union fit in? →



One worker has a voice. Workers together have more influence.

As an individual, you can raise concerns. But when workers act together through a union, they have a stronger, more collective voice that is harder to ignore.

ON YOUR OWN



WORKERS TOGETHER



Collective action leads to real change.

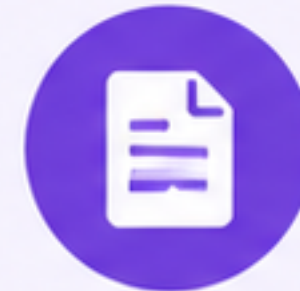
When workers join together through a union, they can negotiate, influence decisions, and improve their working conditions.

What does your union do? →



Your union has two big jobs.

Your union works on your behalf in two main ways: negotiating collective agreements and representing members in the workplace.



NEGOTIATE

A fair collective agreement with the employer

Your union negotiates with the employer to set and improve your working conditions, including:



Pay and allowances



Hours of work and flexibility



Leave (vacation, sick leave, etc.)



Benefits that can be collectively bargained



Job security and workplace rights

Collective-agreement coverage follows the bargaining unit, not formal union membership.



REPRESENT

You and your co-workers in the workplace

Your union supports members when issues come up at work, such as:



Addressing workplace problems



Disputes, investigations or discipline



Accommodation and human rights issues



Ensuring the collective agreement is respected



Providing advice, support and representation when needed



Together, these two jobs help build better jobs and stronger workplaces. Your union negotiates the rules and stands with you when those rules aren't followed.

Federal example: pension provisions are set by law, not the agreement. Some benefits use separate negotiations.

[What is a collective agreement? →](#)



The deal that **covers your job.**

A collective agreement is the negotiated deal between your union and the employer. It sets many of the terms and conditions that cover your work.



COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT

Your collective agreement sets out important workplace rights and benefits, including:



Pay

Salary scales, increases and allowances.



Leave

Vacation, sick leave, family-related leave and other types of leave.



Hours of work

Standard hours, flexibility and overtime rules.



Workplace conditions

Health and safety, equipment, and work arrangements (such as telework).



Allowances

For example, for travel, remote work, on-call or specialized work.



Your rights at work

Job security, respectful treatment, non-discrimination and a fair process when issues arise.



Your agreement covers bargaining-unit employees, including those who have not formally joined the union. Eligibility for particular provisions depends on the agreement. It helps ensure fair, consistent and transparent rules for everyone.

How does this agreement get made? →

How the deal gets made.

Collective bargaining produces your agreement. This simplified example follows Treasury Board bargaining; processes vary.

MEMBERS
IDEAS
PRIORITIES
↓
PROPOSALS
↓
NEGOTIATION
↓
A STRONGER
AGREEMENT

1 Members share priorities



- Members share their experiences, concerns and ideas.
- Surveys, consultations and meetings help identify priorities.
- These priorities guide the union's proposals at the bargaining table.

2 The union develops proposals



- Your bargaining team turns member priorities into specific proposals.
- Proposals may include improvements to pay, leave, telework, job security and more.
- The team researches, analyzes and prepares for negotiations.

3 The union and employer negotiate



- The union and employer meet to discuss and negotiate the proposals.
- Both sides present their positions, discuss options and work to reach an agreement.
- This can take multiple rounds of meetings over time.

4 Approvals, signing and implementation



- A tentative agreement requires a ratification vote and Treasury Board approval.
- The union and employer then sign.
- Effective dates, implementation and retroactive-payment timelines are set out in the agreement.



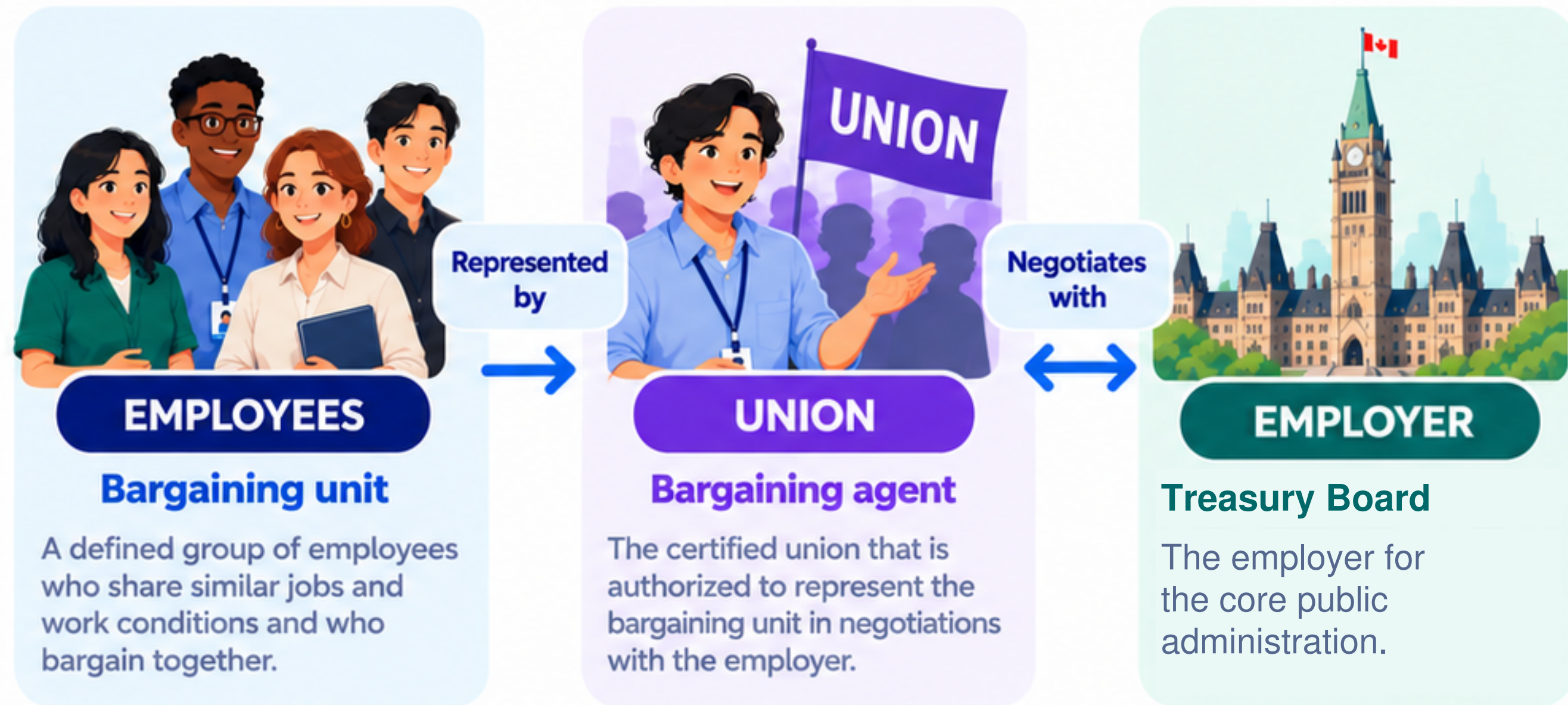
Collective bargaining gives members a real voice in shaping their working conditions.
It's how we turn member priorities into a stronger, fairer workplace.

Who does the union represent? →



A group of workers. A union that represents them.

Example: Canada's core public administration. A union represents a bargaining unit in negotiations with Treasury Board as employer.



Key takeaway:

Unit = workers.

The bargaining unit is the group of employees who bargain together.

PIPSC also represents employees of separate employers, such as the Canada Revenue Agency (CRA), with their own bargaining relationships.

Agent = union.

The bargaining agent is the certified union that represents that group.



Something happened at work. What now?

You don't have to navigate it alone.

1 Something happens



Pay, discipline, leave, accommodation, or a collective-agreement question.

2 Get union advice



A steward or union representative may help.

3 Understand your options



Find out which rules apply and what you can do.

4 Choose a way forward



Resolve informally, or use a formal process if needed.

A grievance is one possible formal process.



Advice, support and representation.

Your union can help you understand your options and represent you where appropriate.

Why does your union have different parts? →



Why does your union have different parts?

Inside PIPSC: different roles, one union.
Other unions may use different structures and names.



GROUP & SUB-GROUP

Your occupational community.

Your Group focuses on bargaining and shared job concerns. Sub-Groups connect members locally within the Group.



REGION & BRANCH

Your geographic community.

Regions and Branches connect members across Groups through regional and local activities.



STEWARDS

Help with workplace issues.

Advice, support and representation when you need help at work.



CONSULTATION TEAMS

A voice in workplace discussions.

Raise shared workplace concerns with management through ongoing discussion.



Several connections. One union.

You belong to a Group and a Region. Stewards and consultation teams support members in different ways.

How do members have a say? →



How do members have a say?

Your union is shaped by members – including you.



SHARE YOUR PRIORITIES

Answer surveys, raise concerns and tell your representatives what matters to you.



VOTE

Choose representatives and vote on agreements or other decisions when eligible.



TAKE PART

Attend meetings, ask questions and help shape proposals.



GET INVOLVED

Volunteer, support an initiative or consider a representative role.



Participation gives members influence.

You do not need to know everything to contribute. Start with one question, one vote or one meeting.

What do your union dues pay for? →



What do your union dues pay for?

Members pool their contributions to fund the work of the union.



NEGOTIATING AGREEMENTS

Research, preparation and bargaining to improve working conditions.



SUPPORTING MEMBERS

Advice, workplace representation and legal support where appropriate.



BUILDING PARTICIPATION

Steward training, member education, communication and local activities.



RUNNING THE UNION

Staff, systems, meetings and the administration needed to deliver services.



Dues are members' money.

Budgets and financial reports help you see how funds are used. Members can ask questions about spending.

Where do you start? →



Where do you start?

You don't need to learn everything at once. Start with a few simple steps.

1

CHECK YOUR MEMBERSHIP

Confirm your membership status and make sure your union has your current contact information.



2

FIND YOUR FIRST CONTACT

Know how to reach a steward or union representative before you need help.



3

FIND YOUR AGREEMENT

Save a link to your collective agreement. You can look up the details when you need them.



4

TAKE ONE SMALL STEP

Read an update, answer a survey or attend a meeting. Choose what works for you.



You are part of your union.

Know where to get help. Stay connected. Add your voice.

Union Ecosystem Atlas: your detailed reference.

Want to go deeper? Explore the Atlas →



Your union. Your next step.

Find your union. Connect with your resources.



PIPSC

Professional Institute of
the Public Service of Canada

pipsc.ca ↗



PSAC

Public Service
Alliance of Canada

psacunion.ca ↗



CAPE

Canadian Association of
Professional Employees

acep-cape.ca ↗



WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Your steward or representative • Your collective agreement
Membership and contact details • Local activities and updates



BELONG TO ANOTHER UNION?

Look it up using your favourite search engine or AI tool.
Start with your union's name and find its official website.



EXPLORE THE UNION ECOSYSTEM ATLAS

Your deeper reference for union structures, roles and connections.
Companion resource • [Open the English Atlas](#)

Created by Jacob Beaulieu | Start with one question. One connection. One next step.

Independently created by Jacob Beaulieu. General principles illustrated with PIPSC and federal public-service examples. Structures, agreements and procedures vary by union, employer and jurisdiction. Consult your applicable agreement and official union guidance. Not an official PIPSC publication; not formally reviewed by PIPSC. References and links do not imply endorsement.