

Reading Quiz: What is a Union (VI)

Name: _____

What Are Unions and Why Do We Need Them?

Imagine you and your classmates are working on a big project together. You want to make sure everyone is treated fairly, everyone gets a turn, and no one is asked to do something unsafe. Now imagine the teacher only listens to one person at a time. It would be hard to speak up on your own. But if everyone in your group agreed on what they needed and spoke together, your voice would be louder and stronger. This idea is similar to how unions work.

A union is a group of workers who join together to improve their jobs. People in a union work in many different places—schools, factories, hospitals, grocery stores, construction sites, and even in entertainment like movie studios. Workers in a union choose leaders to speak for the group. These leaders talk to the boss or company to ask for fair pay, safe workplaces, and reasonable hours.

One reason unions are important is because a single worker might feel scared to complain. They might worry they will lose their job if they speak up. But when workers join together, they are not alone. They can stand up for what they need without fear, because the whole group supports them.

We need unions because they help make jobs better and safer. Long ago, before unions existed, many workers—even children—had very difficult jobs. Some worked in factories for more than twelve hours a day. Many were paid very little, and many jobs were dangerous. Workers got hurt because no one protected them. If someone complained, the boss could simply replace them.

Unions changed this. When workers joined together, they could demand better treatment. They asked for higher pay, shorter workdays, safety rules, and rest breaks. Over time, these ideas became normal expectations for most jobs. Unions also help protect workers' rights. They make agreements called contracts with companies. A contract explains things like pay, working hours, days off, and what happens if a worker has a problem. Because contracts are written down, they can't be easily changed without everyone agreeing.

A Short History of Unions

Unions began to grow in the United States and Canada in the late 1800s and early 1900s. Cities were becoming larger, and many people worked in big factories. Business owners wanted to make as much money as possible, so they often paid workers very little. Jobs were crowded and unsafe.

Workers realized that things needed to change. Groups began meeting in secret to talk about their rights. Some of the earliest unions organized marches and strikes. A strike is when workers stop working to show that their job is important and that they deserve better conditions. Strikes were risky, but they helped bring attention to unfair treatment.

Over time, unions won important victories. Laws were passed that made workplaces safer. Child labor was reduced and eventually banned. Workers gained the right to join unions without being punished. Today, unions still help protect workers, especially in jobs where conditions can be dangerous or stressful.

Why Unions Still Matter Today

Even though working conditions have improved, unions continue to play an important role. They help workers speak up when something isn't fair. They also make sure companies follow safety rules, pay fairly, and treat people with respect. Unions remind us that when people work together, their voices are stronger. They show that fairness, safety, and teamwork are important—not just in school, but in the workplace too.

Reflection questions:

1. Why do you think a single worker might be afraid to speak up about something unfair at their job?

2. How does joining a union make workers stronger than speaking up alone?

3. What clues in the article show that working conditions long ago were unsafe or unfair?

Reading Quiz: What is a Union (V2)

Name: _____

Understanding Unions: What They Are, Why They Matter, and How They Began

When most people think about work, they imagine having a job where they feel safe, respected, and fairly paid. But throughout history, many workers did not have these basic rights. This is where unions come in. A union is an organized group of workers who join together to make their workplace better. Instead of each worker trying to solve problems on their own, the union speaks with one strong voice.

What Unions Do

Unions help workers in several ways. They negotiate with employers to create agreements called collective bargaining contracts. These contracts include rules about pay, work hours, safety standards, and benefits like health insurance or vacation time. Because the contract is approved by both workers and the employer, it protects everyone.

Unions also help when workers have concerns or disagreements. For example, if someone is treated unfairly or fired without good reason, the union can help defend them. This protection gives workers the confidence to speak up about unsafe or unfair conditions.

Why Workers Need Unions

Workers need unions because it is difficult for one person alone to challenge a powerful company. Without a union, a worker who complains might be ignored or punished. But when workers unite, they have more strength and influence. The idea is simple: there is power in numbers.

Another reason unions are important is safety. In the past, many workers faced dangerous workplaces. Mines collapsed, machines caused injuries, and people worked long hours with few breaks. Unions fought for safety laws, protective equipment, and shorter workdays. As a result, many modern jobs are much safer than they used to be. Unions also help make sure pay is fair. Before unions were common, many workers were paid very low wages, even if the company they worked for made huge profits. Unions pushed for minimum-wage laws and rules preventing child labor. Many of the rights workers enjoy today existed because unions fought for them.

A Brief History of Unions

Unions began forming in North America and Europe in the 1800s, during the Industrial Revolution. Machines made production faster, but they also created new problems. Factory owners wanted to increase profits, often by pushing workers to their limits. People worked 12–16 hours a day, including children as young as ten years old.

Workers eventually realized that speaking up individually didn't help. They started forming small groups to demand fairer treatment. These groups organized strikes, in which workers refused to work until conditions improved. Some of these strikes were successful; others ended in conflict. Some workers even risked going to jail.

By the early 1900s, unions grew stronger and more organized. They formed national groups that could support workers across entire industries. Major changes followed: child labor laws, safety regulations, and limits on working hours.

Unions Today

Today, unions still play an important role. Even though many laws now protect workers, problems still exist—unsafe conditions, unfair pay, discrimination, and job insecurity. Unions continue to negotiate for better conditions and to support workers who need help.

In a world where companies are large and powerful, unions remind us that workers also deserve a voice. They show that when people join together, they can create safer, fairer, and more respectful workplaces for all.

Reflection questions:

1. Why is collective bargaining more effective than individual workers negotiating on their own?

2. What evidence from the article shows that unions helped shape modern workplace laws?

3. How did working conditions during the Industrial Revolution make unions necessary?

Reading Quiz: What is a Union (V3)

Name: _____

What Unions Are, Why They Exist, and How They Shaped History

A union is an organized group of workers who come together to protect their rights, improve their working conditions, and negotiate with employers. While this definition sounds simple, unions have had a major impact on history, shaping modern work in ways many people take for granted.

What Unions Do and Why They Matter

Unions serve as a collective voice for workers. When workers act alone, their ability to negotiate for fair treatment is limited. An employer can easily ignore or replace a single worker who complains. But when workers unite, they create a powerful force capable of negotiating real change. This process—called collective bargaining—allows unions to work with employers to establish legally binding agreements about wages, hours, safety rules, and benefits.

Unions also support workers through representation. If a worker faces discrimination, unsafe working conditions, or unfair discipline, the union can challenge the employer on their behalf. This protection creates a more equal balance of power between workers and companies.

Why Workers Have Needed Unions

Historically, workplaces were often harsh and dangerous. During the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s and early 1900s, factories, mines, and railroads demanded long hours and strenuous labor. Many workers earned extremely low wages, and some died from unsafe machinery or harmful chemicals. Children, some as young as eight, worked in mines or factories because their families needed the income.

In these conditions, workers had few rights. Speaking up individually often resulted in losing one's job. This is why unions became essential. They allowed workers to protect themselves through unity. Together, they could demand safer workplaces, better pay, and reasonable hours—things no individual worker could accomplish alone.

A Short History of Unions

Unions began forming in Europe in the 1700s and 1800s, but they expanded rapidly during the Industrial Revolution. In the United States and Canada, early unions emerged in large cities where factory work was common. Workers formed groups such as the Knights of Labor and the American Federation of Labor in the late 1800s. These organizations fought to limit the workday to eight hours and to end child labor.

Strikes became a powerful tool. In a strike, workers stop working to pressure employers to listen to their demands. Not all strikes were peaceful—some resulted in violence from police or company-hired guards. But many strikes succeeded in drawing national attention to the unfair treatment of workers.

By the mid-20th century, unions had won major victories:

- Safer workplaces
- Minimum-wage laws
- Limits on working hours
- Protection against unfair firing
- Rights to overtime pay and breaks

These changes did not happen quickly—they were the result of decades of struggle and sacrifice.

Unions in the Modern World

Today, unions continue to represent millions of workers in education, healthcare, manufacturing, entertainment, and public services. Even though modern laws protect many worker rights, issues such as unsafe conditions, low wages, and job insecurity still exist. Unions work to address these problems and adapt to challenges such as automation, global competition, and new workplace technologies. Unions remind us that progress often happens when people work together. The benefits many workers enjoy today—safe workplaces, fair pay, and reasonable hours—exist largely because unions fought for them. Their history shows that fairness is not automatic; it must be worked for, protected, and sometimes defended.

Reflection questions:

1. Why do you think unions became especially important during the Industrial Revolution and not earlier in history?

2. Why were some strikes peaceful while others became violent? What factors do you think contributed to these differences?

3. In what ways did unions help shape modern ideas about fairness and workers' rights?
