

What is a union?

Union Basics

Your Personal Guide



WORKING
TOGETHER
TO MAKE
CHANGE
HAPPEN



What IS a union?

A union is an organization, of which you are a member, that helps you solve workplace problems.

A union empowers you and gives you skills – many of which transfer to other areas of your life.

A union has the resources to back you up, and the expertise in law, health and safety and human rights to make sure your employer treats you with respect and integrity.

When you join OPSEU, you work together with your colleagues to make change happen. OPSEU is a dynamic force that draws on the experience of its members in many different circumstances to help everyone move forward.

Your union dues pay for staff resources; they pay for lawyers to fight legal battles; they pay for training so you can become an effective advocate yourself. But a union also depends on active members in the workplace.

This process has begun with you and your co-workers exploring interest in joining the union. They believe that organizing OPSEU in your workplace can resolve problems that have been identified.

A union is a team, involving its members, their local leaders, and the union's staff resources and expertise.

OPSEU's strength is in its members, and in the resources that back them up.

What is OPSEU?

OPSEU is 130,000 people working across Ontario. OPSEU members work for the provincial government and for community colleges. They are health care workers in hospitals and nursing homes. They work in developmental services, psychiatric hospitals, provincial courts and provincial jails. They are ambulance paramedics, Liquor Board employees and workers in hundreds of community agencies. They provide a wide range of services to the people of Ontario.

OPSEU has a long history – back to 1911 as the Civil Service Association of Ontario. Over the years, OPSEU has helped improve conditions for all Ontario workers, not just the ones it represents. Thanks to the efforts of OPSEU and other unions, workers in Ontario have shorter work weeks, higher wages, improved benefits, pay equity, stronger health and safety protection and parental leave.

OPSEU is people like you, diverse in every possible way, working together to improve their working lives, their communities, and their world. OPSEU lobbies hard for enhanced public services for all Ontarians. OPSEU is committed to the environment with an active “green” program. With all of its members based in Ontario, OPSEU has a commitment to the province that makes it Ontario’s union for changing times.



What does it mean to be an OPSEU member?

Being in a workplace represented by OPSEU doesn't automatically make you a member. You have to sign a union card. Signing a card gives you a voice in your union, in your local, and across the province.

There are advantages to membership:

- You can participate in the meetings of your OPSEU Local, and vote for its leaders.
- You can serve in an elected position in your Local, as a steward, a member of the Local Executive or a member of your bargaining team.
- You can take part in OPSEU educational programs.
- You can take advantage of member discounts on cell phone packages, home and auto insurance, legal protections, some travel opportunities and tickets to professional sports events.
- You can receive information from the union by mail or electronically.
- OPSEU locals are funded according to the number of members they represent.

If you work in a small workplace, you may feel your voice will be drowned in the sea of larger Locals, but every OPSEU Local, no matter how small, has at least one representative at the union's annual Convention where all the major decisions are made. Every Local can take part in education programs. Every Local has a vote in the union's leadership elections. If you speak up, OPSEU will hear you.

Do I have to pay dues?

Under Ontario law, yes. Everyone in the bargaining unit, member or not, is covered by the collective agreement. Member or not, you get the wages and benefits negotiated by the union. Member or not, you get the vacations and job security language. And member or not, the union is obligated to represent you if you have a grievance.

Because you get the benefits, you must pay the dues.

OPSEU's dues, at 1.375 per cent of pay, are among the lowest in Canada. Your dues are completely tax deductible. Your dues pay for experienced staff with expertise in negotiations, human rights, benefits, pay equity, health and safety, pensions, grievance handling and much, much more.

They pay for a network of regional offices and membership centres across Ontario. They pay for education programs, meetings and conferences. In OPSEU, the central union picks up all the costs for bargaining, grievance meetings and so on – including lost wages, hotels, travel and accommodation.

A portion of your dues comes back to your Local to spend as you and the other members decide.

Statistics show that union members in Ontario earn on average 27 per cent more than non-union workers. The advantage is even more dramatic for pensions. For 2008, 76 per cent of unionized workers were members of employer pension plans, compared to 28 per cent of non-union workers.

Your union dues are a solid investment in workplace rights and respect.

How do I join?

There are three steps to bringing OPSEU into your workplace.

- 1.** You and your co-workers sign union cards.
- 2.** The union applies to the Ontario Labour Relations Board to represent you.
- 3.** The Labour Board holds a vote at your workplace. If the majority of your voting co-workers choose OPSEU, the Labour Board certifies OPSEU as your bargaining agent.



You have the protection of the Ontario Labour Relations Act as soon as OPSEU applies for certification. From that point on, your employer cannot make arbitrary changes to your existing pay scales, benefits or working conditions. From that point on, the changes will be negotiated between the employer and the colleagues you elect to your bargaining team, backed by the technical support of union staff.



Who makes the decisions in OPSEU?

You do. Once you vote for OPSEU, you will be called to a meeting to elect your local leaders and to elect a bargaining team from among your colleagues. Your employer must recognize the union as your representative, and your elected leaders as people speaking on your behalf.

OPSEU staff will help you develop proposals for your first collective agreement. You will vote on those proposals, and you will set your priorities. You decide.

Then your elected union bargaining team, supported by union staff, meets with your employer to negotiate a contract that best represents your priorities, and your employer's situation.

Once they negotiate a contract, they will bring it back to you. All members of the bargaining unit can vote on the contract. If you vote yes, you have ratified your first collective agreement. If you feel the employer's offer is not good enough in the situation, you can vote it down and send the team back to do better. But if that is your decision, you should also be prepared to take action to support your position and your bargaining team. This could include wearing buttons or holding lunch-hour protests, so the employer knows you are serious in rejecting the offer.

In extreme cases, it could mean voting in favour of a strike if necessary. This does not necessarily mean a strike!

You will have full union support throughout this process. For the record, strikes are very rare. In Ontario, 95 per cent of union contracts are settled without any job action.

What does having a contract do for me?

It is easy to say that having a contract spells out your terms and conditions of work, but what does that really mean? It means you have a book of rules that you have negotiated with your employer; that both sides have agreed to; and that you can enforce through your grievance procedure (more on that later). Your contract will spell out your hours of work. It will say when overtime pay kicks in. It will say how much vacation you get, and how vacations increase with years of service. It will detail what the employer pays toward health plans, pensions and other benefits. It will have rules for posting job vacancies and criteria that help you plan your career path. It may spell out mileage rates or training allowances. It may cover safety equipment or uniforms. It will cover recognition of your elected union representatives as entitled to speak up for you to your supervisors without being accused of insubordination. Where once your employer gave you “privileges,” your union contract gives you enforceable rights.

How does a grievance work?

Say your contract says you get paid overtime **or** time off at time and a half after 40 hours in a week, and your employer insists you take it in time rather than money. You have a kid starting college and you want the money. If your employer insists on the time-off option, you go to your elected OPSEU steward and say: “I want to file a grievance.” Your steward takes down the information and together you go to the supervisor, point out what the contract language says, and ask for the money. That’s Stage 1. If your supervisor says no, you take it to Stage 2 – probably the HR department. (your contract will tell you). In this case, HR will almost certainly say yes and you get the money, But if not, you can take it to Stage 3 – an independent external arbitrator who will listen to both you and to HR and rule in your favour as the language clearly supports your claim. Without the contract, if your supervisor would rather give you time than money, you are stuck with taking the time.

Can I be fired for joining a union?

It's against the law. It's as simple as that. OPSEU will vigorously defend anyone who is fired – or harmed in any other way such as being denied better shifts, or overtime – for union activity.

Will the employer shut down?

No union can force an employer to keep an uneconomic operation going. However, a union can ensure that change has minimal impact on employees – through notice periods, the right to move to other jobs you are capable of doing, through equity in layoffs and so on. These things are negotiated into collective agreements, giving union members a foundation on which to plan, and a legal basis to claim their rights. Without a union, the employer does as it wishes.

Why do employers often fight unions?

Unions speak up for workers. Unions make sure that people are treated fairly. Unions make sure that all the good shifts don't go to the boss's favorites. Unions restrict an employer's absolute right to set the rules. Unions also force employers to obey the law – whether it is over health and safety, employment standards or human rights. Most workers don't know all the rights they have under the law, and employers take advantage of that. OPSEU knows your rights and can help you enforce them. Most workers don't have the resources to stand up for the rights they know they have. Thanks to your union dues, OPSEU has those resources.

Need more information?

OPSEU RESOURCE CENTRE

1-800-268-7376

OPSEU Resources Centre is a one-stop information centre operating Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Eastern time. Trained representatives can answer your questions on a wide variety of labour topics and put you in contact with the people you need when things go wrong.

1-800-268-7376 toll-free
416-443-8888 from the Toronto area.

The OPSEU website – www.opseu.org - is a gold mine of information on the union, its members, and its activities.

Or call OPSEU's organizing department:

416-443-8888 from Greater Toronto or
1-800-268-7376 toll-free province-wide.

The screenshot shows the OPSEU website homepage. At the top, the OPSEU logo is displayed with the tagline "Ontario's Union for the OPS". Below the logo is a navigation menu with links for Home, About Us, Join Us, Contact Us, Media, and Site Map. A central banner features the text "CHOOSE PUBLIC" and "OPCS Bargaining 2012: Together we will protect our contract and services." To the right, there are sections for "President's Message" and "Vice-President/Treasurer". The main content area includes a "HEAR FROM SAFETY" section about Injured Workers Day, a "Coalition forums continue this week in Kingston, Cornwall and Ottawa" section, and a "Public service workers take OPCS" section. The footer contains a "CONNECT WITH OPSEU" logo.



OPSEU Ontario Public Service
Employees Union
SEFPO Syndicat des employés de la
fonction publique de l'Ontario

OPSEU ONTARIO'S UNION FOR CHANGING TIMES

www.joinopseu.org 1-800-268-7376