

UNITED STUDENT WORKERS OF BEREA-CWA

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

HOW DOES A UNION WORK, ANYWAY?

We are joining a democratic union. Once we unionize, a committee of workers, along with a union rep, sits down with the administration to bargain a contract on such issues as pay, benefits, and working conditions. Once a deal is reached, members of our union vote it up or down. Members in each labor department elect representatives to represent their interests in an ongoing way around workplace safety, compensation, benefits, discipline, and so on. Union members also participate in the broader labor movement through demonstrations, voter drives, and lobbying. A union provides us with a vehicle for making change in our workplace and in society. It is truly a system for the people, by the people!

WHY DO WE NEED A UNION?

Through collective discussion with our fellow workers, we have identified a variety of challenges facing student workers at Berea. These include problems related to diversity, equity, and inclusion; unlivable wages; harassment and discrimination; a lack of autonomy or agency in the workplace, few outlets for voicing our concerns; health and safety, and a lack of accountability for Berea's administration and Board of Trustees. Although workers may see leadership make changes such as listening sessions, slight pay increases, and outsourcing concerns to the Student Government Association, these ad hoc changes are no substitute for the security of a legally binding union contract.

IS THE UNION AN OUTSIDE, THIRD PARTY?

No, the union is us! Hundreds of us have been actively involved in union efforts, talking to our coworkers, participating in our union's democratic decision-making process, attending events, and finding other ways to contribute. If you want to get involved too, there are plenty of ways to do that. Once we vote for a union, all of us at Berea will be our own "shop." We will be a part of a larger union of workers, but we will figure out what we want in our contract. We will sit at the bargaining table and negotiate with management. We will elect our coworkers to represent us and help us.

OK, I'M PRO-UNION, BUT WHY SHOULD I WEAR MY WRISTBAND OR BUTTON OR BE PUBLIC IN MY SUPPORT?

We cannot build a strong union in secret. Being public removes fear, and helps us win our union and a strong contract. If all of us show our support we are all more protected from any anti-union activity. If we openly show we are strong and for the union – administration is more likely to remain neutral. Being public for our union is our best protection - We are stronger together!

BEREA IS ALREADY A GREAT SCHOOL WITH FREE TUITION, WHY WOULD WE WANT A UNION?

Just because we're getting tuition-free education doesn't mean Berea can't be a better and more democratic place for all workers. We want a union so that we can have a collective voice in how decisions are made at Berea College, and we believe forming a union will make Berea a more democratic and equitable place for all student workers.

I'VE HEARD THAT "BEREA COLLEGE CANNOT INCREASE STUDENT PAY DUE TO FEDERAL REGULATIONS ON FINANCIAL AID." IS THIS TRUE?

While the amount of a student's financial aid package is determined by the federal government through the FAFSA application, the College has various avenues available to them to provide additional support to students in the Labor program. Most importantly, however, we as undergraduate students at Berea are coming together to build our own, worker-run organization to negotiate in good faith with the Berea administration over the terms and conditions of our work. Bargaining in good faith means that Berea College administration will need to share relevant information with the bargaining committee and work together with us to find mutually beneficial solutions. We are confident that when we come together at the bargaining table, we can put our heads together to find creative solutions to any pay and scholarship challenges that come up.

WILL FORMING A UNION HURT THE COLLEGE?

The truth is that offering livable pay, decent benefits, and respect on the job helps any college attract diverse and qualified student workers able to thrive while they're in school. By making the college more transparent, a union can actually strengthen internal communication and make operations run more smoothly. Additionally, our union is a democratic organization made up of student workers. We vote on our contract - would you and your coworkers vote for a contract that leaves you worse off and hurts the college?

WHEN DO WE START PAYING DUES, AND HOW MUCH ARE THEY?

No one pays a penny in dues until we all bargain a union contract, and that contract is voted on by everyone. When we have a union contract we are satisfied with, and only after we vote "yes" for that contract, then dues kick in. Dues are only \$1.30 per hundred dollars you earn. That is the total cost. Dues paid by members are the main and only source of funding for our union, and create the infrastructure needed to fight for better working conditions. The union is a non-profit; all the money goes back into the membership.

CAN'T WE GET MORE BY JUST SITTING DOWN AND TALKING INDIVIDUALLY WITH THE BOSS?

Bargaining collectively is the only way to effectively negotiate "big issues" such as health insurance, living wages for all, and fair working conditions. We're dealing with systemic issues, and we want to confront that, but we want to do so as a community. With a union, gains are fair and guaranteed by a contract.

ARE STUDENT WORKERS ABLE TO UNIONIZE? ARE WE LEGALLY WORKERS?

Yes! Student workers have the same rights as workers in other industries. Student workers at other undergraduate colleges such as Grinnell, the University of Pennsylvania and many more have formed unions and won big changes on their campus. Recently, undergraduate student athletes at Dartmouth have petitioned the NLRB for an election, and their petition is pending. The Work College requirements specifically outline that Work College programs must follow federal, state, and local employment law in hiring undergraduate employees, this includes adherence to the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) which is a federal law setting out requirements for employers (like Berea) and their relationship to employees (including undergraduate workers). Here is the 2022 Work Colleges Consortium guide to the Work College Program which lays this out explicitly starting on page 71.

WILL FORMING A UNION CREATE TENSIONS AT WORK BETWEEN STUDENT WORKERS AND SUPERVISORS?

Most union members find that once a union is established, it is less tense—and less personal—to approach a supervisor as a representative of the union than it was to raise issues as a lone individual.

WOULD I BE AT RISK FOR JOINING OR SUPPORTING A UNION AS AN INTERNATIONAL STUDENT?

As an international student, you are afforded all of the protections U.S. citizens have when it comes to organizing a union. Your visa status will not be jeopardized by supporting a union.

WILL UNION MEMBERSHIP AND UNION ACTIVITY AFFECT MY CURRENT OR FUTURE VISAS?

No. The U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) cannot ask you questions about your union membership or participation in lawful union activity. In addition, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) recognized the importance of enforcing labor laws and signed an agreement with the Department of Labor (DOL) that states it is essential to ensure proper wages and working conditions for all covered workers regardless of immigration status. It is your right to belong to a union and being a union member cannot affect your current visa status or future visa application.

WILL I FACE NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES FOR SUPPORTING A BERA UNION?

You have a federally protected legal right to unionize; it is illegal for an employer to retaliate against an employee organizing a union, even at a private institution. And, to prevent any student from being singled out, unionizing is always done collectively. If anything, there are positive consequences for supporting a union, such as the ability to collectively negotiate your working conditions and the solidarity you get from colleagues.

WILL WE BE FORCED TO STRIKE?

No. The only way we can strike is if we collectively VOTE to strike. More than 99% of CWA contracts are bargained successfully without even the threat of a strike. Striking is not a go-to strategy, but rather a last resort to an uncooperative institution that refuses to bargain fairly. Only after exhausting all other avenues and methods of campaigning would we consider the possibility of a strike. Our decision-making is driven by democratic principles and a strategic approach. Would you and your coworkers decide to strike without careful deliberation?

OUR TUITION IS PAID BY DONORS, WHAT WILL THEY THINK IF WE FORM A UNION?

We are unaware of any non-profit or colleges that lost funding because of unionizing campaigns. In fact, having student workers feel empowered and secure in the workplace could improve their satisfaction, the quality of their work, and the connection they feel to their campus community. These are all things that would make donors happy. At the same time, public opinion is broadly in favor of unionization efforts. Unionizing could actually attract donors who see the value of unions. On the other hand, being anti-union is considered detrimental to a progressive institution's reputation.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT IN THE COMING WEEKS FROM THE ADMINISTRATION?

We hope that Berea lives up to its values and our expectations and does not interfere with our legal right to form a union. However, it is possible that the administration follows the script of many anti-union campaigns. Anti-union tactics could include telling workers they don't need a union and to give the administration a second chance or time to make more changes. They could also include spreading misinformation about what a union is, or trying to stall and slow down the process. Remember, federal law says we have the right to form a union in an atmosphere free of intimidation.

Management will make improvements. That is because we are organizing and organizing is powerful. But without a union contract, they can just take these victories away. Let's take whatever improvements they make as our first union wins, then keep going to vote in our union and secure these wins in a legally binding contract.

WHAT ARE THE NEXT STEPS? HOW DO I GET INVOLVED?

We are asking student workers to sign cards and our Mission Statement to show their support for the union. Once the majority of us sign cards and our Mission Statement, we will demand that the administration voluntarily recognize our union, be neutral, and bargain in good faith. At that point, the administration can either voluntarily recognize the union or require that we go to the National Labor Relations Board for a formal election, and they can decide to be neutral and not interfere with our right to a free and fair election. If a majority of us vote yes, we will have won our union!

Once the administration recognizes us or we win the election, we will democratically elect a committee of our coworkers across all departments to form our bargaining committee. They will be supported by a representative from CWA and will sit down with management to bargain out a contract. Once they tentatively agree upon a contract, all union members will vote on whether or not to approve it.

After the contract is negotiated, members will elect representatives to help uphold the contract and support workers with any challenges.

CONTACT US TO GET INVOLVED!

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