



What is a trade union?

KS3

KS4

Ages 11-16 ⌚ 3 min read

Imagine you're unhappy with your wages at work. You go to your boss and ask for a pay rise. Your boss says no. That's probably the end of that conversation — you don't have much leverage on your own. Now imagine all 5,000 workers at the company walking in together and making the same request. That's a very different conversation. That's the basic idea behind a trade union.

What a union does

A **trade union** is an organisation that workers join to act together when dealing with their employer. Instead of each person negotiating their own pay and conditions individually, the union does it on behalf of everyone at once. This is called **collective bargaining**.

Unions negotiate over things like wages, working hours, holiday entitlement, safety standards, and the right to fair treatment if someone faces disciplinary action. Because they represent large numbers of workers, employers generally take them seriously.

Think of a union like a school council. On your own, you might complain to a teacher about something and get ignored. But if the whole year group votes for a representative to raise the same concern formally, it gets taken to the headteacher and something actually gets done. Numbers change the balance of power.

The history behind them

Unions became powerful during the **Industrial Revolution** in the 19th century, when factories were dangerous, hours were brutal, and children were put to work.

Individual workers had almost no rights. Unions organised strikes — where workers refuse to work — and gradually won legal protections that most people now take for granted: the eight-hour working day, weekends off, minimum wages, workplace safety rules.

Strikes

A union's most powerful tool is the **strike** — when workers collectively stop working to put pressure on an employer. Strikes work because businesses need workers to function. No trains running, no deliveries, no nurses on wards — suddenly employers have a much stronger reason to listen.

Strikes are controversial. They can disrupt public services and inconvenience lots of people who aren't part of the dispute. Supporters say that disruption is sometimes the only way workers without other power can be heard. Critics argue unions can overreach and make businesses uncompetitive.

Are unions still relevant?

Union membership has declined since its peak in the 1970s, especially in private sector jobs. But they remain important in many industries — teaching, nursing, the railways, fire services. In recent years, workers at companies like Amazon, Starbucks, and various tech firms have been forming new unions, suggesting the idea isn't going away any time soon.