

Appendix C. Playbook for Unionizing

The American Association of University Professors (AAUP) provides a great set of guides on union organizing that range from the basics to specific steps to forming a union.¹ Below, we distill this information in a kind of playbook for both gauging the possibility and interest in forming a union, undertaking a drive, and, if successful, handling contract negotiations. Because there are many concerns that academic workers bring to the fore that range from wages and position descriptions to issues of faculty governance and academic freedom, it is important to note here that every campaign might turn on a different group of issues that mobilize people. It is also important to note that the messiness of coalition building cannot be fully captured in single playbooks but that “wall-to-wall” unions that bring together all kinds of academic workers (graduate students, adjuncts, non-tenure track, tenure track, and staff) are an exciting and inclusive way to justify and run a union drive.

Recruit: Start by identifying leaders on campus. These folks might include newer and more seasoned workers. However, the core leadership group of a union is key to a successful drive. So, choosing people who can generate consensus around the larger group and who have broad appeal will likely be necessary. Also, if there are current governance structures, such as a faculty or staff council, it is important to consider whether or not to turn to specific individuals in those groups to recruit leaders. This initial group of recruited leaders becomes the campaign committee. Typically not elected until the union is recognized, this group is tasked with organizing and inspiring a larger group of people to join the campaign or drive. The American Association of University Professors suggests that this organizing committee do the following two tasks:

1. Create a full list of organization members with their names, positions, and contact information.
2. Further recruiting leaders from across the college or university to represent membership. They suggest a broad representation on the organizing committee of 1 “member for every ten to twenty future members” (AAUP).

Consult: Many organizers take the step of contacting either an appropriate (i.e., teacher’s union) or local union organizer in order to connect, learn about local initiatives, and learn from on-the-ground organizers who advise union campaigns. And while there might be the option of creating an independent union, joining a national union gives the chapter resources and access beyond what one might gain as a small independent union. In this model, the national organization

1. This playbook is adapted and expanded from the American Association of University Professors’ “Forming a Union Chapter” (<https://www.aaup.org/chapter-resources/forming-new-union>).

often engages with the local chapter on things like a union drive and, later, contract negotiation and collective bargaining. So, choosing the right union to join can involve some vetting, community-wide discussion, and, of course, research. Below, we provide databases and organizations that have aggregated information about labor unions in the United States. While some academic institutions choose to join teacher unions (e.g., American Federation of Teachers or the National Education Association). However, adjunct faculty, graduate students, and full and part-time faculty have successfully unionized through the service workers union (Service Employees International Union, 2022). So, in addition to conducting local research and hands-on person-to-person engagement around working conditions, key issues, unionization support, and other on-the-ground concerns, the organizing committee also needs to research and eventually vet national unions to determine if they want to join them and become a chapter or if they want to form an independent union.

Campaign: Before starting a campaign or drive, it is critical that the organizing committee is both representative and, also, that the folks they recruit are on board with unionization. Typically, a union drive is not made public until there is broad support for unionization. The campaign starts with education work by the OC to the college population. This can take the form of educational materials, information meetings, one-on-one meetings with individuals, and, perhaps, more public meetings about worker concerns, such as a town hall meeting. If part of a national union, an organizer from outside the institution should also be able to help support the campaign and, perhaps, offer resources for the organizing committee.

The American Association of University Professors suggests the development of the following to start to campaign:

- Talking points
- Database or file for tracking visits to community members
- Training organizers in basic questions and concerns about unions (such as dues)
- Check-in meetings among the organizing committee to share “roses and thorns” or positive and negative outcomes from organizing work
- A plan to keep the work sustainable and enjoyable

Before going public, the organizing committee needs to lay out its main goals and concerns—based on their meetings with workers—to promote “unifying support” and have majority support for unionization (AAUP).

Gathering signatures and going public: Once majority support has been secured, the organizing committee begins a card signing drive. This is a very public moment in the campaign and one that is likely to be plagued by misinformation, intimidation, and stalling tactics. In this moment, it is critical to document the drive, keep up momentum with public gatherings and celebrations of card signing, and combat misinformation with media and on-the-ground counter information campaigns.

In the public phase of the campaign right before and during voting:

- Maintain a list of “yes,” “no,” and “unsure”/“unclear” votes for the union
- Continue to meet with people one-on-one during the drive
- Clarify and explain how to fill out the ballot (perhaps with a sample ballot with a “yes” vote for the union)
- Develop a clear system to track who has voted and who still needs to vote (see resources below)
- Circulate clear information about where, when, and how to vote
- Establish poll watchers from the organizing committee to document any intimidation, obstruction, or misinformation tactics during the vote

After the Vote: If the vote passes, take time to celebrate with the organizing committee and union supporters. Also, as soon as possible, communicate the results of the vote to participants in the drive (and in the community at large) in order to control messaging. After taking some time to regroup and rest, a new committee (perhaps with members of the organizing committee) needs to be formed to participate in contract campaign negotiations. Again, a representative from the national union might be able to provide support or resources during this time. It is also likely they will have a representative on the bargaining committee.

The Contract Campaign (from Office and Professional Employees International Union):

- Requires information gathering and data
- Survey members about key issues and concerns
- Organize a contract bargaining team
- Keep members informed about the creation of the contract and key issues
- Continue to engage community members and allies
- Continue to recruit members and promote the contract campaign
- Develop new leaders and recruitment strategies
- Celebrate your victories

Resources to Get started

- Union base provides connections to union organizations around the country (<https://unionbase.org/>)
- Center for Union Facts has compiled a comprehensive database about US-based labor unions (<https://www.unionfacts.com/cuf/>)
- Action builder (<https://www.actionbuilder.org/>) is an organizing tool developed in partnership with the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO); it helps organizers to track union drives through digitized versions of wall charts, assessments, membership lists, etc.

- American Association of University Professors (AAUP) union chapter resources (<https://www.aaup.org/chapter-resources/union-chapter-resources>)
- National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) (<https://www.nlr.gov/about-nlr/r-rights-we-protect/the-law/employees/your-right-to-form-a-union>)
- American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) (<https://aflcio.org/formaunion>)

It takes a lot of work and continuous engagement (and pressure on the institution) to engage in a union drive. At times, this work can be intimidating, frustrating, and seemingly pointless. If anyone has ever sat through a faculty council meeting or a department meeting, we know how many voices there are in the room and how few of them take up the majority of air time. Creating a union (or even establishing an AAUP chapter as an alternative to current governance structures) can help to dramatically improve working conditions and worker rights. So, while this work can take years, it is also something that we writing center folks are already trained to do. We are trained to do research and assessment, to communicate our results, to convince people to engage in best practices or ethical practices, and to connect people from disparate places in the university. We are also continuously engaging in marketing and information campaigns even as we train a rotating group of people in the work we do. And, we often write *a lot* and quickly. In a lot of ways, organizing is quite similar work. So, in addition to considering the advice above, think about what unique strengths you bring to organizing work from your writing center and other academic work. As one of the stories in this collection shares, this work helps benefit the most precarious workers among us, but, also, it is about creating community and connections and, crucially, sharing information about what workers are entitled to based on collective bargaining. It is empowering and necessary work