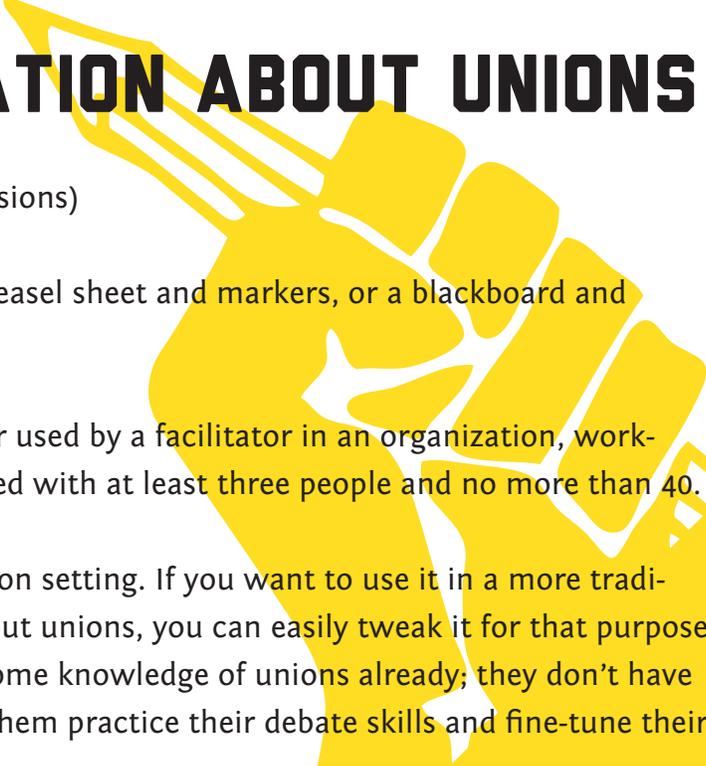


# HAVING A CONVERSATION ABOUT UNIONS



**Time Needed:** 1.5 - 2.5 Hours (or two 45 minute sessions)

**Space Needed:** A room and chairs

**Materials Needed:** Would be preferable to have an easel sheet and markers, or a blackboard and chalk, or a computer and a projector.

This role play can self-facilitated in a small group or used by a facilitator in an organization, workshop, classroom, etc. It is recommended this be used with at least three people and no more than 40.

**NOTE:** This activity is mainly designed for a pro-union setting. If you want to use it in a more traditional classroom environment to have a debate about unions, you can easily tweak it for that purpose. Furthermore, this activity is for people who have some knowledge of unions already; they don't have to be experts, but this activity is supposed to help them practice their debate skills and fine-tune their talking points.

## INTRODUCTION

The labor movement, unions, and the issues that they struggle for remain a hot-button issue, especially as the U.S. government begins to advocate more and more for drastic austerity measures. As such, it is all the more important to keep talking about labor, and to bring the issues of workers and their families to the front of people's minds.

You may know the ideas or be comfortable with the facts, but have you ever gotten into an argument about unions—with family, friends, colleagues, talking heads on the TV—and all your information and arguments unexpectedly got stuck in your throat? Suddenly, you realize you're unprepared for the heat of the moment—how to actually argue with someone who is anti-labor and anti-union.

This resource is meant to help with just that sort of situation. This facilitation guide is designed to assist you in creating a role play that is a debate on the importance of unions.

## GOALS

This lesson plan will help people:

- Speak out about the importance of unions and workers' rights.
- Expand their knowledge on unions and workers.
- Understand the arguments of people on the other side of the issue, and be better prepared to respond to them.

## **IDENTIFYING THE ARGUMENT (30 MINUTES)**

Start by letting everyone know that before you begin the role play, you are going to spend some time identifying pro-union and anti-union arguments. This will better help people understand the issues they are arguing for and against.

1) In a full group, have everyone identify what they think are the most important issues regarding the importance of unions. Ask people to go around the room popcorn style (whoever has an idea speaks up) and say what critical issues and points stand out to them.

You can use these as prompt questions to get the conversation going:

- What have unions accomplished that have improved everyday people's lives?
- In the workplace?
- For families?
- For children?
- How do unions strengthen workers and society on a regular basis?
- In history?
- In your community?
- In your field of work?
- How have unions been able to positively respond to economic crises?

Make sure to visually track these ideas, perhaps with a projector, an easel sheet, or a white/black board. Take about 10 - 20 minutes to do this. Tell people they should not get bogged down in discussing/arguing different points. This is simply a brainstorm, and the first rule of brainstorming is not to stop or disregard any points.

2) Then, make a second list. This list should focus on two things:

A) What you think people who are anti-union and anti-labor believe. These arguments should run the gamut from issues even some progressives have adopted (unions have become corrupted, their pensions are bankrupting the economy) to traditionally more conservative arguments (unions destroy businesses, workers are only self-interested).

B) Direct responses that people who are anti-union and anti-worker might have to your own arguments listed in the previous brainstorm.

Make sure to brainstorm these direct responses as thoroughly as you did your own arguments. These are what you are going to practice your role play with. Take about 10 - 20 minutes to do this.

## **FISHBOWL ROLE PLAY (30-60 MINUTES)**

Next, set up a fishbowl role-play experience. To do this, create a circle of chairs and then put two in

the middle. Ask two volunteers to take the seats in the middle of the fishbowl. Assign one of them the role of pro-union and the other of anti-union. Let them know they will be conversing (whether they make it a civil debate or a heated argument is up to them) and they should use the ideas and points raised in the previous brainstorm.

It's important to start the debate with a prompt: Give each person a role, give the role play a setting, and provide a starting point for the debate. You can either come up with your own, ask people to work together to come up with one (take 5 minutes max, don't get bogged down in this), or use the samples below.

Sample Setting: News Show Debate (Like CNN, DemocracyNow!, or something fictional)

Sample Roles: Union representative from a local factory; Anti-union local Congressional representative

Sample Prompt: "Welcome to the show! Today, with the number of strikes around the country growing, we're talking about labor and unions. We're joined by two guests on opposite ends of this issue. Over the past few years it seems like the once fading power of unions has begun to reassert itself. Some say that's a good thing—that it will protect workers from exploitative practices and work towards a better economy. Others think this is unfortunate, and that unions are corrupted and a drain on our society. Guests, what do you think? Congressperson, you're up first."

Before you begin the debate, lay down the structure for the role play and everyone's participation. Tell people who are watching the debate that they can switch in for other people—either the anti-union or the pro-union person—at any time by yelling "FREEZE!" The debate should halt at that moment. The person who yelled freeze should take the place of one of the debaters, who should leave their chair and join the circle, and then the debate continues. As a general rule, people should wait at least 2 minutes before stopping the role play and yelling "FREEZE!" again.

Encourage participants to take on both the pro and anti-union roles—part of the exercise is understanding where the other side is coming from so that people can be more prepared for these kind of debates.

When you're ready, get the role play started by telling people their setting, their roles, and then reading aloud the prompt.

If at any point people get stuck, they should refer to the brainstorm of points that the group made together. Or, they can pause, yell "FREEZE!" and call on someone from the circle to take their spot, or help them craft a response.

In general, you should allow the conversation to go where it goes. You might want to have a third person in the circle (whether its you or another participant) who acts as a facilitator (or the show host, if you're using that prompt). This facilitator should keep asking questions to keep the debate going. Or, if there's a lull, you could ask participants what additional prompt question could be presented to keep the conversation going.

Do this activity for as long as you want or people are interested. Thirty minutes to an hour would be ideal.

### **DISCUSSION: WHAT WORKED AND LESSONS LEARNED (10-20 MINUTES)**

Finally, end with a full group conversation about what participants are taking away. Here are a few sample questions you can use for this conversation:

- What, to you, were the most powerful pro-union arguments?
- What were the best ways people responded to the anti-union arguments?
- What anti-union arguments did people have the hardest time addressing?
- Were there critiques of unions that you felt were legitimate? What were they?
- What are you going to take away from this activity as best ways to have a conversation about defending workers and the role of unions?

As follow-up work, or as a follow-up class/group activity, the participants could create talking points/a cheat sheet for debating unions and labor.