UNION 101: COMMONLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How does a union benefit workers, especially in the entertainment industry?
The IATSE, which is the largest union in North America for below-the-line entertainment employees, strives to improve the social and economic conditions of our members. People working under IATSE agreements enjoy portable healthcare and pension, enforced working conditions such as overtime, late meal penalties, proper classification of workers (specifically the abuse of 1099's), and a grievance system for dealing with workplace issues. We believe employees have a right to a work/life balance and, at times when that is impossible or undesirable, to be paid adequately for their time. Collective representation gives you, the employees, a unified voice in the workplace. Visit iatse-intl.org to learn more.

How do those of us that are new to the union qualify for health care and how much does it cost?
It depends on what plan you are in. If your employer is signed up with the Motion Picture Industry Plan (MPI) a participant must work 600 union hours in a 6 month period to initially qualify for healthcare. After that amount is met, after only 400 union hours every 6 months, participants qualify for healthcare. Above and beyond that number, members can bank up to 450 union hours. Beginning in January 2013, single participants will continue to pay no premiums. However, participants with 1 additional member in the plan will pay $25/month and those with 2 or more dependants will pay $50/month.

What does the MPI health plan look like?
The Animation Guild has a comprehensive online chart detailing the various healthcare options available at animationguild.org/health-plans.

What if my job is over and I am without employment or cannot find union work?
To help maintain your healthcare during times of unemployment, you can store up to 450 union hours and draw from that “bank” to meet the required amount of 400 union hours in a 6 month period. If you utilized your full bank of hours, you would be able to maintain your healthcare through at least 6 months of unemployment.

How do the MPI Pension Plan and the IAP work?
The pension plan is a traditional (defined benefit) plan, meaning that you will be paid a set monthly check when you retire. You will continue to receive a check every month for as long as you live. The employer pays into this plan every hour you work in covered employment. The amount of that monthly check would depend on how many years and hours you worked in covered employment in your career. The Individual Account Plan (IAP) is also funded by the employer. It is a “defined contribution” plan, much like a 401K.
For more information on the pension and IAP, visit the MPI website at mpiphp.org.
How much does it cost to be a member of the IATSE and a Guild?
It varies depending on the Local. For an example, quarterly dues for The Animation Guild, which includes IATSE dues, are between $75- $105 a quarter depending on your job classification.

Is there only one contract that all companies must agree to?
No. The IATSE has a wide variety of contracts that take into account both budget and specific modes of production on a project. The IATSE has a long history of working with both major corporations and small independent companies. With the workers’ input, the IATSE would start with a template and adjust the specifics to address the needs, challenges, and realities of your workplace.

If we go union, who would negotiate our contract with the employer?
Representatives from the IATSE, as well as a bargaining committee of VFX employees from the facility, would be at the bargaining table.

What are the costs to an employer for a union employee?
There is no way to tell until we sit down and bargain the contract. There are many moving parts when building an agreement that works well for employees and employers. Since we have a wide array of contracts to cover the diversity of entertainment projects made in the US and Canada, there is no single answer to this question. However, the benefits to an employer are numerous: skilled workers eager to work at a union shop, guidelines that help them remain within California and Federal laws, and a level playing field with other employers.
You can review examples of contracts on The Animation Guild’s website at animationguild.org/contracts-wages.

Would we be forced to only “wear one hat” on a project? Would we not be allowed to utilize all our job skills on a project?
The IATSE understands that there are a variety of skills employed by a VFX artist on any given project. We do not want to create unnecessary rigidity among job classifications. Each contract would deal with these issues to avoid workplace abuse but allow artists the flexibility to be creative and productive. VFX artists have a long history of past practice to draw from; the employees’ expertise on these issues would be part of the bargaining committee’s role during negotiations.

Will unionizing the VFX industry in the U.S. drive all work overseas?
There are a variety of reasons that companies do business here, including quality of the workforce and geographic closeness. Our thought is that if the companies are going to send your work overseas, they will do it with or without a union contract. There is simply no way to compete with the standard of living and wages. The film industry has a nomadic style of production and, although being mostly unionized, the bulk of movies and television are made in North America.
Companies chasing subsidies is an issue and will continue to be so as long as there are subsidies to be chased. Our job is to make sure that wherever these companies go in North America, they can’t hide from their obligations to supply their employees health and pension benefits and follow rules governing working conditions.
In terms of motion picture production, we have been very successful. Over 90% of production in the US and Canada is done under an IATSE contract. On an international level, IATSE Local 891 is the largest Local in Canada, with over 5,400 members. They represent 22 departments, including visual effects. Find out more about 891 at vfx.iatse.com.
How do I organize my workplace?

First: these are very general guidelines and concepts for organizing and we encourage you to have a longer conversation with a union representative.

- Unionization starts from within. The IATSE will not force its way into a facility; you and your co-workers have to want union representation.
- To help foster support among your team, utilize social media to get the word out; create an anonymous blog and twitter account to rally and educate your co-workers. For an example of this, visit SPIunion (http://spiunion.wordpress.com).
- At the same time, contact the IATSE to hold off-site informational meetings. If you are unsure how to begin, we can help you get started.
- Obtain representation cards, either by printing them out or ask an IA rep for a stack. We can hand these out at meetings, or coordinate with employees to distribute cards anonymously within the facility. Signed representation cards are confidential and will never be seen by the employer. For SPI employees, SPIunion has a representation card online at spiunion.wordpress.com/rep-card.
- When a majority of the workforce has signed a representation card, the union will contact the Employer. The union will ask for a meeting to negotiate a contract.
- Workers will be part of the bargaining committee during contract negotiations to ensure workplace issues specific to your company are addressed.

These are brief answers to topics that can and should involve a longer discussion. Please call or email us with any questions you may have. We look forward to hearing from you.

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