



A Look at Federal Employee Unions

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If you're lucky enough to be hired by the federal government, then you have a job for life. At least that's how government jobs are often viewed, both inside and outside the Beltway, and not without some degree of truth.

The federal government may not offer a lot of private sector perks to its employees, such as bonuses, stock options, or significant salary increases. Yet it does offer a mostly stable environment with long-term job security.

Fed workers looking for additional job security and workplace protections might find their answer in union membership. Federal unions represent a diverse group of federal civilian employees, mainly those who would be classified as white collar or service industry workers. Analysts, researchers, computer technicians, Foreign Service, nurses, maritime, and electrical workers, for example.

Mark Roth, the general counsel for the American Federation of Government Employees, a leading union for feds, told OhMyGov! that the average union member is about fifty years of age, has approximately twenty-five years of work experience, and works in highly-specialized jobs at agencies such as Health and Human Services, Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense.

The Office of Personnel Management (OPM) [lists more than 80 national and international unions and associations](#) which are recognized, or which have representation in government executive agencies. Federal employees who work in the judicial and legislative branch generally don't have much union representation. Of these 80-plus agencies, eight are unions that represent federal civilian employees.

Over the years OPM consistently reported that approximately 62% of federal employees were union members. In 2005 the Wall Street Journal claimed that only about 35% of the federal workforce belonged to federal unions.

Federal unions have complained that their low union membership totals is due to the federal government being the largest 'right-to-work' employer. Right-to-work allows an employee to determine whether he or she wants to join a union. It also keeps employers from making union membership an employment prerequisite.

According to Richard N. Brown, president of the National Federation of Federal Employees, much of the federal government still lacks union representation. He adds that the federal government's right-to-work policy presents unique challenges when it comes to union recruitment efforts.

There are a few federal employee unions whose membership base numbers over 100,000. The top three federal civilian employee unions, ranked in order by size, are the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE), the National Treasury Employee Union (NTEU), and the National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE). Combined membership in these three unions is almost 850,000.

The AFGE represents employees in the federal government, the District of Columbia, and some private-sector employees working in federal facilities. The NTEU concentrates on federal employees in non-managerial positions at federal agencies. NFFE's membership consists of blue- and white-collar government employees.

Depending on a new federal employee's position or federal agency, he or she may be recruited to become a union member. Here's a summary of the three largest federal unions that represent federal civilian employees.

American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE)

The [AFGE is the largest union that represents federal civilian employees](#). Its website claims that it has over 600,000 members that represent "federal and D.C. government workers nationwide and overseas."

AFGE represents many of the larger and best-known federal departmental agencies --- State, Commerce, Justice, Defense and Education.

The union has been around for over seventy years and has been affiliated with the AFL-CIO since its inception, which itself has over 10 million members. AFGE's Mark Roth said the union started out with 167,000 members in 1988 and has increased its membership over ten straight years.

AFGE's literature states that they have "workers in virtually all functions of government at every federal agency" who depend on them for "for legal representation, legislative advocacy, technical expertise and informational services." Roth adds that their union representation efforts might involve negotiating working conditions, ensuring fair rotation work schedules, or protecting general civil service rights.

AFGE asserts that their union is interested in "improvement of how the government is run and having productive government employees." In order to meet this goal the AFGE operates a "three-tiered operation" that involves legislative lobbying, organizing unions and membership maintenance "depending on the agency's union needs."

There haven't been any major controversies surrounding the AFGE's representation of its federal employees. At times the organization does get involved in legal and public relations battles with their members' employers over the hiring of contractors instead of federal employees and the low funding and staffing of federal agencies.

For the most part due to its size and visibility, the AFGE is considered the face of federal employee union representation.

National Treasury Employee Union (NTEU)

Unlike AFGE, the [National Treasury Employee Union is an independent union](#) not affiliated with the AFL-CIO. It was founded in 1923 and has become the second largest federal employee union.

NTEU President Colleen M. Kelley states that the union's mission is to "organize federal employees to work together to ensure that every federal employee is treated with dignity and respect."

Kelley adds that the NTEU is "concerned both with the day-to-day issues that arise in the workplace and ensuring that federal employees have the tools and resources they need to provide the kind of quality service the public not only has the right to expect but deserves"

According to its website, the union represents 150,000 employees. NTEU members are generally non-administrator employees who work in white collar, service or technical positions such as park rangers, custom border police, nurses, engravers, accountants and communication specialists.

Members come from large agencies like the Department of Agriculture, the Federal Communications Commission and the Internal Revenue Service. But they also provide union support to somewhat smaller offices such as the Administration for Children and Families, the Nuclear Regulatory Commission and the Farm Service Agency.

NTEU has had some success in protecting its employees from layoffs and salary discrepancies. For example, in 2005 the union fought to get a federal court to rule that portions of the Department of Homeland Security's personnel rules were illegal.

Kelley states that the NTEU "assertively represents" federal employees in various ways, such as in workplace grievance and arbitration procedures; congressional lobbying efforts to ensure that the "federal employee viewpoint is heard" on their respective agency issues; and at the collective bargaining table.

National Federation of Federal Employees (NFFE)

The [third largest federal employee union is the NFFE](#) with a membership just over 100,000. The NAFE claims to be the oldest union that represents "working class federal employees." For most of its ninety plus years it has been an independent union, but it is now affiliated with the AFL.

The membership base of NFEF is similar to NTEU in that it represents larger agencies such as the Department of the Interior, Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs. Of the three unions, it is the only one who has members that are part of the armed services, with members from the U.S. Army, the Coast Guard, and the Marines.

NFEF has experienced some significant membership losses over the years due to the loss of blue-collar jobs in the federal workplace. Plus, it has faced stiff competition from the NTEU and especially the AFGE who have extended their recruiting efforts to NFEF members.

NFEE President Richard N. Brown believes that organizing is the “lifeblood” of any union and views union recruitment and organizing as NFEE’s “top priority.” Accordingly, much of the union’s organizing efforts have been aimed at “informing bargaining unit employees” (non-union member employees who have union protection) about why it’s “important and beneficial for them to be a dues-paying member.”

Even with their decreasing membership numbers the NFEE still has over 70,000 more members than the National Association of Government Employees, the fourth-ranking federal union in terms of membership.

To Join or not to join?

Besides an overlap in the types of members that are represented by these three unions, the benefits that they offer their members are similar in nature. The AFGE, NTEU and NFEE, like other federal unions offer such benefits as discounts in health and auto insurance, education assistance, retirement plans, disaster protection and money management. The average cost of union memberships is no more than \$20 per pay period, which is usually deducted from a member’s paycheck.

However, the most important aspect to having a federal union membership is the collective bargaining agreement. This agreement is a contract between an employer and the union in which terms of employment are negotiated and adhered to by the employer and the union. These terms can be about the hiring process, salary, working conditions employment termination, work hours or employee grievances. A union represents the employee to ensure that the employer does not violate the collective bargaining agreement.

Unlike non-federal unions, federal unions face certain limitations on what they can do because their members are federal employees. For example, the Hatch Act does not allow federal civilian employees to participate in partisan political activities at their work site. Also, federal unions cannot compel a non-union member to become a union member; to pay union fees or make union membership an employment precondition. As a result, federal union membership numbers are relatively small in comparison to the overall size of the federal civilian workforce.

The most significant difference between non-federal unions and federal unions is that federal unions can’t advocate striking or actually go on strike. According to the U.S. Federal Code, federal employees are not allowed to strike. It is deemed an unfair labor practice which can result in employment termination and the revoking of the union’s status as a recognized labor organization.

Is it necessary as a new federal employee to join a federal union? There are those who view being part of a federal union as another layer of job security protection. Yet over 2 million federal civilian employees do not belong to a union. Plus, the government has the founded reputation of employment stability in that employees are not terminated on a regular basis. So it often comes down to personal preference and availability. Strictly by the numbers, union membership doesn’t seem to add much in the way of extra job protection for federal workers. Which may be a major reason so few feds join up.