

TRADE UNIONS

**Do you belong to a trade union?
You can belong without even
knowing. But you should know.**

Being a member of trade union can mean the difference between getting the medical help you need when you break a bone – or suffering for a lifetime without proper treatment. It means getting paid for your loss instead of being cheated. It means there is someone on your side when you are being abused by a captain or company. It means being flown home when your contract is over, with the money you are owed in your account.

Seafarers usually work on a contract-by-contract basis. You might work for many different employers on different ships over the course of your career. Many of those ships are covered by what is known as an “ITF CBA”, a term you might have heard. It means the ship operates under an ITF-approved collective bargaining agreement signed by the ITF or our affiliated seafarers’ unions around the world. That’s why they’re called ITF-approved CBAs.

When you work on an ITF ship, you may belong to a trade union for the duration of your contract and not even know about it. That’s why we have developed the ITF Seafarers app, where you can look up a ship to see if it is covered by a CBA. Whether you are on a ship covered by the ITF or not, you should belong to the seafarer’s union in your home country – for your own protection.

We urge you to contact your national seafarers’ union and ask about joining.

Being a member of a union gives you protection, higher wages, better conditions and benefits that can extend to your family.

To enjoy those benefits, it helps to understand a few basics about unions, how you fit in and what your rights and obligations are.

A trade union is an organisation formed by workers to protect the rights and advance the interests of its members – on wages, benefits and working conditions. When workers act together, we are stronger. When we join together through unions, that strength grows.

A trade union should be:

- **Independent** – from the influence of government, companies.
 - **Democratic** – members should have a vote and a say in how the union operates.
 - **Transparent** – union members can see how their union fees are spent and what policies the union pursues.
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WHAT DOES A TRADE UNION DO?

Where a trade union is recognised by an employer, it bargains with the employer for a contract that covers wages and working conditions. If you have a claim or dispute, the union represents you. Where necessary, unions may organise strikes or campaigns to ensure that employers live up to the contracts they sign.

WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF JOINING A TRADE UNION?

- Better protection from unfair treatment.
- Better workplace health and safety.
- Better pay and conditions – union members generally have better pay and conditions than non-union workers.
- A voice in decisions affecting your working conditions and rights.
- Strength in numbers – the more members a union has, the greater its chances of winning a better deal for workers.

WHAT SHOULD I EXPECT FROM A TRADE UNION?

According to the ITF Seafarers Charter, seafarers' trade unions should provide the following minimum services to their members:

- A membership card.
- A union newsletter, journal or magazine.
- A contacts directory, including telephone numbers and names of union officials.

- Assistance with any claim arising under a collective agreement signed by the union – for example, non-payment of wages, and handling of personal injury, illness and loss of life claims.

Some unions provide additional services and benefits to seafarers and/or their dependants, such as:

- Welfare and social needs.
- Training and education assistance.
- Medical and/or dental care.

In such cases, the ITF Seafarers Charter states that the union should ensure that service are in line with membership fees, that the funds are transparent and properly controlled.

WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT JOINING A TRADE UNION?

Membership fees:

You should expect to pay membership fees. Fees vary from union to union. They are usually paid monthly.

Political activities:

Trade unions may engage in political work – for example, lobbying or campaigns to promote legislation favourable to their members or workers in general.

Free and democratic:

A trade union should be free and independent of any employer and should be democratically run.



Some employers set up company unions to deter seafarers from joining legitimate trade unions. In some countries, governments will establish their own unions for similar reasons. These are known as yellow unions. Joining a yellow union, whether it is a company or state-sponsored union, offers no genuine protection to workers.

All ITF-affiliated trade unions must be free and democratic and must adhere to the principles laid down in the ITF Constitution.

WHAT IF THERE IS NO ITF UNION IN MY COUNTRY?

There are some countries where there are no ITF affiliated trade unions for seafarers, such as China, and in other countries where trade unions are illegal there are no trade unions at all, such as the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia.

If you are working on a ship that is covered by an ITF Collective Agreement, then you will automatically become a member of the ITF union that holds the agreement for the duration of the agreement.

Visit the **Look Up page** on the ITF Seafarers website to see if your union is affiliated to the ITF.

