



ARE YOU GETTING PAID WHAT YOU'RE WORTH?

For many skilled tradespeople, the decision to go union comes down to a simple question: what is your total compensation really worth? This article follows Nick Rodgers, a refrigeration technician in Wisconsin, who spent five years in a non-union shop before joining Steamfitters Local 601 and discovering the true value of union membership.

Nick didn't plan on becoming a refrigeration technician. He had a Bachelor of Science degree and had his eye on studying occupational therapy, until he did the math. Another \$80,000 in debt, for a career that might not pay it back fast enough. So he took a different path, landed at a non-union refrigeration shop, and spent five years getting good at the work.

In early 2023, he switched to a union refrigeration shop, Climate Pros, and became a [Local 601](#) member. What changed wasn't just his job; it was his entire understanding of what compensation means.

ARE YOU HITTING A CEILING AT WORK?

At his previous job, he worked hard, got skilled, and hit a wall. He did learn a lot, but at a small family business, the leadership positions are already spoken for. Training also stops when you become profitable. You get fast at specific tasks, but nobody explains the reasoning behind them.

When he looked ahead and saw no path for advancement and no room to grow, he knew it was time to move. [Local 601's apprenticeship and training programs](#) offered a different trajectory entirely.

READY FOR A BENEFITS WAKE-UP CALL?

Before Nick joined Local 601, his wife had their first child. It was a high-risk pregnancy and the bills reflected it. They paid nearly \$10,000 out-of-pocket for that delivery.

They were still paying off that bill when he made the switch. About a year ago, they had their second son. That delivery? Essentially nothing out of pocket.

That's the clearest argument Nick can make for [union benefits](#). It's not abstract. It showed up in his bank account.

THE SALARY CONVERSATION IS MORE COMPLICATED THAN YOU MIGHT THINK.

When Nick moved to Local 601, the hourly rate on paper gave him pause. On the surface, it looked like a step backward. But that's exactly the math non-union workers get wrong.

It's health coverage you don't have to fund yourself. Wage increases are built into the contract and that's a huge benefit. When you add it all up, the picture looks very different from the number on your pay stub.

A pension that keeps accumulating is also a game-changer. You become fully vested in the Steamfitters Local 601 pension after earning 5 Years of Vesting Service. To earn a full year of service credit, you generally must work at least 870 to 1,000 hours.

There's always been this idea that you make more non-union. But if you're paying for your own health insurance out of that check, you're already behind—and that doesn't even account for the union pension.

- Nick, Refrigeration Technician, Local 601

WHAT'S THE TRAINING DIFFERENCE?

One thing Nick wasn't expecting when he joined Local 601 was how much he didn't know. Non-union training gets you efficient and fast on specific tasks, but the foundational understanding, the why behind the work, often gets skipped. Union training fills those gaps, building the kind of knowledge base that makes a technician genuinely versatile.

Nick also notes that a five-year [apprenticeship](#) wasn't possible for him due to having a family and student loans. But for him, the [accelerated training](#) program, which lasted about two months, was the ideal solution for an experienced refrigeration technician.

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT UNIONS?

Nick has heard several myths about union work.

"You're locked in." Apprentices make a five-year commitment, and that makes sense, given the investment in their training. But experienced tradespeople entering through an accelerated program have significantly more flexibility.

"What about strikes?" Local 601 hasn't been on strike since the 1980s. Nearly fifty years of negotiated agreements without a work stoppage. The risk is real in theory and very low in practice.

Nick notes that many experienced non-union workers assume they already know what they need to know. But union training has a way of revealing how much was actually missing.

WHAT HE WISHES HE'D KNOWN SOONER

For Nick, the long-term picture keeps coming back to security. That means stable wages, predictable increases, a pension, and health coverage that doesn't crater your savings when your family needs it most. His advice to any non-union tradesperson sitting on the fence:

"What do you have to lose? If you're already having that conversation, it means you're already unhappy with where you are."

Calculate the total package - not just the hourly rate, but the health insurance you're paying out of pocket, the retirement you may or may not be building, the training you're not getting, and the ceiling you keep bumping into. Then compare.



THE BOTTOM LINE

Ready to run the numbers? [Reach out to Local 601](#) to start the conversation.