



Steamfitters Local 601 Member Spotlight

WHY MIKE UNGER CAME BACK TO LOCAL 601

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Mike Unger left Local 601 for a non-union shop, not realizing he was giving up job-placement support and benefit protections.
- Local 601 organizers reconnected him with a contractor within his union network almost immediately after he returned.
- Non-union pay that looks competitive often ignores hidden costs: no pension, unstable healthcare, and no guaranteed wage increases.
- Rejoining opens a clear advancement path and secures competitive wages and stable health benefits.

WHY MIKE CAME BACK

Sometimes it takes a wake-up call to realize what union membership really means. That's what Mike Unger learned when he traded his union job for non-union work early in his career and discovered what happens when the safety net of strong health benefits disappears.

Today, Mike is a project manager at JM Brennan and an instructor for Local 601. His path wasn't a straight line, but every turn points to the same conclusion: going union is worth it. Here's his story.

WHY NON-UNION FELT LIKE AN OPTION

Mike came up through Gateway Technical College, then landed hotel maintenance work while building hands-on HVAC and refrigeration experience. He joined Local 601 early on as a maintenance tradesman. When the company he worked for went out of business, his boss moved to a non-union shop and brought Mike along.

It felt like the natural next step as he already knew the work and the people, and the non-union shop hired him right away. What Mike didn't realize was that, as a Local 601 member, he had options he never used. "I didn't know the union could help me find another job. I had lost my job and thought I was just out of luck," he said.

He stayed non-union for about a year and a few months. Then his wife got pregnant with twins.

WHEN PROMISES DISAPPEAR

The non-union company had promised solid healthcare coverage. But the high-risk pregnancy meant frequent doctor visits and mounting bills. When the bills came, the company found reasons to change what it had originally offered. Paperwork wasn't filled out correctly. Terms were reinterpreted. What had been promised simply became unavailable.

That moment made the difference clear: non-union work offered promises, but Mike needed support he could count on.

Your non-union work history isn't thrown away. Your work and your worth are recognized and amplified through the union.

- Mike Unger, Project Manager at JM Brennan & Instructor, Local 601

"WE'VE GOT YOU."

Mike went back to the Local 601 union hall and explained what happened. What came next was the opposite of his non-union experience. "You go from uncertainty to feeling like, 'We've got you. Everything's going to be fine,'" he notes.

Organizers Dale Poweleit and Brian Toutant helped him with [membership](#) and to reconnect with a contractor and back into union work. "A lot of people don't realize that unions like Local 601 are a resource during a work crisis, whether losing a job or other personal issues that can arise," Mike notes.

The union isn't just about negotiating contracts. It's a strong third-party advocate ensuring your benefits stay stable and high quality, with somewhere to land if your situation changes.

THE MATH MOST NON-UNION WORKERS GET WRONG

Non-union pay can look competitive until you factor in out-of-pocket costs like health insurance premiums, the lack of a pension, and no guaranteed wage increases. Once those expenses are deducted from your paycheck, the numbers change quickly.

Local 601 provides protection that compounds over time, including a pension building toward retirement, health coverage that doesn't evaporate when your family needs it most, and wage increases built into the contract. For workers with families counting on them, the difference between a promise and a guarantee matters more than the number on a pay stub.

A CAREER PATH YOU CAN ACTUALLY SEE

Rejoining Local 601 opened Mike's career path to training and advancement. His trajectory went from maintenance worker to foreman, then into management, and now, instructor. "There's a large network in Milwaukee. If you work hard and stand out, people notice."

He entered the union's process as someone with real-world experience, not a five-year [apprentice](#) starting from scratch. Local 601 worked with what he had, helped fill in what he was missing, and gave him credentials that matched his skills. Now he teaches the classes himself.

BUSTING THE BIGGEST MISCONCEPTIONS

"You'll just be a number." Mike says that Local 601 is more like a brotherhood, as members support each other through fundraisers and show up for one another during personal hardships unrelated to the contract.

"My non-union experience won't count." Not true. "Your work history isn't thrown away. Your work and your worth are recognized and amplified through the union."

"It's too big, too intimidating" Mike felt that leap too. But that same size creates opportunity with a network of contractors, a range of work, and room to grow that a small shop can't offer.



WHAT HE'D TELL HIS YOUNGER SELF

"Your biggest barrier is fear of change. But the union support is real."

His advice: ask your Local 601 reps key questions before you join. What happens if you lose your job? How does healthcare actually work? Can you switch between service and construction? What happens if you get hurt? Some people don't think to ask and that gap is where uncertainty lives.

QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE YOU DECIDE

What happens if I lose my job? Local 601 organizers can connect you with another contractor in the union network, often quickly. Members aren't left to navigate a job loss alone.

How does healthcare actually work? Union health coverage is backed by a strong third-party advocate, so it doesn't disappear or get reinterpreted when your family needs it most.

Does non-union experience count if I decide to join the union? Yes. As Mike put it, "Your work history isn't thrown away. Your work and your worth are recognized and amplified through the union." Local 601 worked with his existing HVAC and refrigeration experience rather than starting him over as a first-year apprentice.



THE BOTTOM LINE

A union tradesperson's total pay and benefits package runs about 39% higher than a non-union counterpart's (\$56.12/hour vs. \$40.27/hour) once health insurance, retirement contributions, and other benefits are factored in even though the base hourly wage gap alone might look smaller on paper (Source: LIUNA, citing U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data).

Ready to have that conversation? [Reach out to Local 601](#) to find out what you might be missing.