

Welcoming New Workers

IT'S MY
FIRST DAY,
I'M A LITTLE
NERVOUS.

I'M HERE TO
SHOW YOU
THE ROPES
AND ANSWER
ALL YOUR
QUESTIONS.



Welcoming New Workers

A lot of problems come with being a steward, and one of the biggest is that there's just never enough time to do the job. That's why a lot of stewards never quite get around to the task that's at the very heart of their duties: welcoming new workers to the job and establishing the union's presence.

Of everything you do, this ranks up there with the most important. A few minutes spent with a worker when he or she is brand new to the job comes back to benefit you and the union a hundredfold.

Unless you're in a situation where your workplace became unionized with the participation of the current workforce, you're like a million or so other stewards across North America. That is, the union was already in place when the workers were hired. As far as they're concerned, they enjoy decent pay, benefits and conditions because the employer is fair, not necessarily because there's a union there that fought to make standards what they are. Depending on where you work, new employees may not even be aware there is a union — unless someone tells them.

You're not likely to have a very strong union or committed membership if the workers think they owe it all to the employer. They'll think of the union only as that outfit that takes dues from their paychecks. It's a formula for a weak union, one that has nowhere to go but down.

Establish the Union Presence

So a steward should make it a point to greet new workers as they come on the job — not just to give them a crash course in the union and all the good stuff it's responsible for, but to establish the union presence and make the union part of the worker's workday reality.

What do you do? Veteran stewards know the drill without thinking about it, but a brushup can never hurt, and newer stewards almost always can benefit from a quick look at some ways to approach new workers.

The first step is sometimes the hard-

est: finding out who the new person is and making an effort to meet him or her.

You'll have to figure out what's the best timing, but seek out the new worker before, during or after work, on a break or at lunch or dinner, and introduce yourself. The sooner you do it, the better — the worker's first day on the job is the best of all.

Be Friendly and Open

Have a smile on your face and a welcome in your voice. Offer your hand.

Tell the new worker who you are and your role in the union. Get his or her name, and, if it makes sense in your situation, a job title and an understanding of the hours he or she will be working.

Understand that, the first day on the job, a new worker may feel too shy or insecure to ask a lot of questions. So be prepared to offer some basics. Among them: Where's the bathroom? A water fountain? The break-room? Questions can be as basic as who is the supervisor, is there a time clock, and when is payday.

When you can, introduce the new person around: a new job can be a lonely place.

You'll want to explain a little about the union. You may be giving the worker a membership application, so you should be prepared to explain how the union works and where the dues dollars go. Tell the worker when and where union meetings are, and where you can be contacted during work.

It might work well to let the person digest everything you've said so far, then meet up with him or her again a day or two or three later, to answer questions and further explain union benefits and

procedures. Be prepared for "second-day" type questions, like "how long do I have to work before I get a vacation," or a raise, or health insurance.

If you're likely to be in the same place for lunch, such as the workplace cafeteria or breakroom, seek out the new worker and invite him or her to join you and some other co-workers. If your union is small enough that an officer or two is available, make sure they stop by to say hello as well.

Talk About the Social Side

Let the new worker know about some of the social aspects of the union — not just the meetings, but things like union-

sponsored clubs or outings. Tell them about specific benefits of membership, like a credit union, if you have one, or the union credit card, discount buying and other programs.

Depending on where you are and who your employer is, union membership may not be mandatory, so you want to let new workers know of the good reasons to join up.

Take it all slow, and take it easy. You'll have other opportunities to talk to the worker in the days ahead. The key is to remember that the first impression is the most important one. If you're friendly and open, you'll make a good impression and the new worker will be more likely to come to you in the future with questions and problems. The union will be thought of as friendly, helpful and trustworthy. With any luck, you'll have planted the seeds for the growth of a future activist.

— David Prosten. The writer is editor of Steward Update.



Why Contracts Can Be Hard to Interpret

In steward heaven all contracts are written in clear language that everyone understands. Here on Earth, though, it seems contracts are written to make them as difficult to interpret as possible.

There actually are *reasons* for that — not necessarily *good* reasons — but at least explanations for why contracts are so difficult to decipher.

For starters, it can be a challenge to write language that is clear and applies to many different situations, functions and locations. To see how difficult it is, try writing rules for your family or club or church. You may be able to talk about what you think should happen, but once you have to write it down it gets more difficult.

Once you write down the rules, show the words to a few people. You are likely to find that people define words differently, think of situations that you did not anticipate, and have creative ways to interpret what you wrote to suit their needs and wants. Then imagine yourself in a tense negotiating session with your employer, and you have to come up with rules that management will sign on to — late at night with the pressure of deadlines and

the possibility of a strike looming over you. Because time is short, negotiators on both sides of the table may agree to unclear language because that is the only language the parties can agree upon.

Disagreements over what a contract clause means can happen because of many things: new technology, new methods, or other changes in the workplace that came about after the contract was written. It is very difficult to write contract language for every situation that might arise months or even years later.

Add to all this the fact that lawyers

play a big role in most negotiations and you can see why reading through some contracts is like trying to jog through mud. And remember that side letters, memorandums of agreement and stipulations frequently are added on to contracts. Sometimes rather than rewrite an entire contract in negotiations the union and management will write and agree to only those sections that are new. That means the steward needs the original contract *and* the additions to figure out what is being said.

So, what do you do when you encounter vague language? The first thing to do is keep in mind that management may be counting on stewards getting so intimidated by the jumble of words that they give up. Don't let yourself be manipulated into giving up the fight for fairness.

Instead, keep the following five points in mind and play offense.

Management may be counting on stewards getting so intimidated by the jumble of words that they give up. Don't let yourself be intimidated.

1 Don't simply accept management's interpretation of the contract.

What the contract means can be defined by how you enforce it.

Management will try to

stretch those vague clauses to give them more power to do what they want. If we don't fight back for an interpretation that is more favorable to the members, eventually management defines more and more of it in their favor and your rights can be eroded.

2 Don't rely only on grievances.

Filing grievances is only one way you enforce your contract. You also can do it though the members' collective strength. Involve members in showing

management you are united and willing to take a stand for a fair interpretation of your contract.

3 Be sure you have the most up-to-date contract, complete with all add-ons.

Experienced stewards know that sometimes more than one contract section applies to a particular issue. That's why, if there are any side letters, memoranda of understanding and stipulations, you need to have copies of them all and read them as if they were all part of one contract.

4 Find out from the union's bargainers what was meant when the language was negotiated.

When language is unclear the "intent" — or what the union and management meant when they wrote it — becomes very important. There may have been discussions in bargaining about why the language was needed or examples of situations that might arise under the language. These discussions, especially if they are backed up by good bargaining notes, can help determine how the language should be interpreted.

5 Report the most difficult sections of the contract to your bargaining team before the next talks.

The union can propose clearer language or add to or subtract from some clauses to make them better for the members. There is no guarantee you will win the new language, but you just might. Then you will get just a little closer to heaven with some contract clauses that you don't need a Harvard Law School degree to interpret.

— Ken Margolies. The writer is on the Labor Extension faculty of Cornell University.

Combating Steward Burnout

Every union steward knows that stress is built into the job. You work closely with other people to try to resolve their problems, and that means you are constantly dealing with crises and frustrations. At the same time, you have to stay on top of time limits and understand complex and confusing work rules and contracts.

Unless you are careful, these constant stresses and tensions can quickly lead to burnout. Psychologists have identified burnout as a definite set of symptoms most often experienced by workers whose job requires them to work constantly with other people's problems.

"Dealing with people can be very demanding," writes psychologist Christina Maslach in her book *Burnout: The Cost of Caring*. "It takes a lot of energy to be calm in the midst of crises, to be patient in the face of frustrations, to be understanding and compassionate.... While most people can find the energy to do it occasionally, it is very hard to do all of the time. And yet, 'all of the time' is the expectation we have of people workers."

If you find yourself feeling tired all the time, getting irritable at everyone you know, and working longer but getting less done, you may be experiencing burnout. Other symptoms include feeling isolated from friends and family, losing your sense of humor, and feeling guilty about not working hard enough.

Even if you don't have these specific symptoms, the stress of the steward's job can wear you down. Try these suggestions to reduce stress and prevent burnout.

■ **Think positively** about your steward's job. Make a point of periodically reviewing your accomplishments. And if you have a particularly challenging problem to solve, think about *optimum solutions* to that problem rather than focusing on its difficulties.

■ **Give yourself a break.** Take this suggestion literally — plan to have regular breaks away from your steward's job. If possible, set up certain times of the day or week that are just for play. Take time with family and friends as well as time just for yourself to rest, relax and decompress. Include exercise in your plan — it's a proven stress-buster.

■ **Create a support network.** You need to have people in your life who can offer useful advice and information. Don't hesitate to ask for help from other stewards or officers in your local. Most likely someone else has confronted the same problem you are facing, and can pass on suggestions for resolving the situation.

You also need friends or family members who can simply listen and offer sympathy without being critical or pushing their own agendas.

■ **Maintain emotional distance.** People will come to you with problems that may cause them intense pain. Although you will want to express compassion and understanding, you also need to remain detached so you can function effectively. If you become emotionally involved, you may not be able to clearly see the problem and potential solutions.

Stay objective and rational as you listen. Focus on seeing the problem in abstract and intellectual terms. Your objectivity will permit you to fully understand the situation and focus on the best possible resolution.

And, Finally, Some Wisdom from a Pro

And for the final word on avoiding the stress that can lead to total burnout, consider this philosophy of life, offered by legendary pitcher Satchel Paige, who stayed in the major leagues until he was 47 years old:

1. Avoid fried meats, which angry up the blood.
2. If your stomach disputes you, lie down and pacify it with cool thoughts.
3. Keep the juices flowing by jangling around gently as you move.
4. Go very lightly on the vices such as carrying on in society. The social ramble ain't restful.
5. Avoid running under pressure at all times.
6. Don't look back. Something might be gaining on you.

■ **Create lists of priorities and goals.** The steward's job requires mastery of many details and the ability to juggle multiple tasks. Keep track of all these demands by taking a few minutes every day to structure your priorities and write down the tasks you want to accomplish.

Make sure the list is concrete and definite. For example, don't write, "Resolve problem about overtime." Instead, break the job down into manageable pieces, listing goals such as reviewing the contract, interviewing specific workers and requesting specific records.

■ **Accept your limitations.** Every steward occasionally forgets something important, makes mistakes or fails at some task. Nobody is perfect, so stop beating up on yourself. Instead, resolve to do the best you can, and move on to the next challenge.

— Sue Dawson. The writer is a veteran labor journalist.

Making the Most of Grievance Meetings

Most grievance procedures provide stewards the opportunity to discuss a problem with management. These meetings can be extremely important to winning grievances, but it's up to the steward to make the most of the sessions. The problem is that managers often behave in ways that stack the deck against the steward. The steward should not sit still for this common employer tactic.

A Typical Scenario

The boss schedules a grievance meeting with you for 3 p.m., just half an hour before you're due to leave work. You meet in his office. He has you sit on a low folding chair, while he sits behind his desk. He starts talking about fishing, and goes on to complain about the economy. The phone rings. You finally get into the grievance when his secretary interrupts. Then the phone rings again. He finally gets interested in what you're saying and starts firing questions at you when the final buzzer rings to punch out.

What's Really Going On?

Although this might seem to be "just part of the game" for the steward, it is important to understand what is going on and how it can work against you. As our scenario suggests, things to watch out for are:

- When will the meeting be held?
- Where will the meeting be held?
- Your physical relationship to management.
- Control of the agenda.
- Interruptions.
- Pacing.

It Doesn't Have To Be This Way

A grievance meeting should be a fair exchange between the union and management. The "equity principle," long recognized by the National Labor Relations Board, asserts that you are not "just an employee" at these meetings. As the steward, the representative of the union, you are an equal. A handy rule of thumb is to ask yourself, "Would my supervisor treat another management person this way?" If the answer is no, then you should not expect to be treated that way either.

Here are some hints for how to handle this classic management tactic of one-upmanship.

- If the proposed time is inconvenient, object. Suggest another time. Remember, this is a meeting of equals, so you have just as much say in the schedule as does management.
- A neutral space, such as a conference room or lunch room, is much better than your supervisor's office, which represents management power and control. Remember, in a meeting like this you are management's equal.
- Sitting in a low chair puts you in a weaker, subservient position. If you find yourself maneuvered into this situation, just stand up. Say the chair doesn't work for you and you need a different one. Or, just say you want to move to a more neutral space.
- A little chit-chat is fine, but this can



be used to distract you from the case at hand. Remind him or her what you are here for and get on with the purpose of the meeting.

■ A single interruption so the supervisor can take a call may be acceptable; more than that is just not necessary. If the supervisor were meeting with another manager, you can be pretty sure he or she would most likely have all calls held for the duration of the meeting. The supervisor should be no different when meeting with you.

■ Remember, this is not just management's meeting, it is just as much the union's meeting. Therefore, you, too, can control the pace. If your supervisor likes to ask questions, ask him one back. If he is the quiet type, then you can be quiet too. If he gets loud, then you can, too.

Management practices around grievance meetings aren't written in stone, and may develop because stewards allow them to exist. Asserting your rights as an equal will not only force the supervisor to take you more seriously, it will also help you to win more grievances.

— Tom Juravich. The writer is professor of labor studies and director of the Labor Center at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Managers often try to stack the deck against the steward. Don't sit still for this common tactic.

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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Brothers and Sisters,

Let me take this opportunity to again thank you for the outstanding service you provide your brothers and sisters in the IAM. Being a shop steward is a tough job, but your commitment keeps the IAM moving forward.

As we inch closer to the 2008 Presidential elections, it is becoming increasingly clear that this election process will be like none before. Candidates are campaigning earlier and harder to keep up with early primaries. Working family issues such as protecting jobs and access to health care dominated the 2006 midterm elections. It's up to us to make sure they do the same for the presidential primaries and the 2008 presidential election. Educate your fellow members and make sure all the candidates speak to the issues impacting North America's middle class.

In regard to your day to day duties as a shop steward, this edition of the *IAM Educator* provides you with a wealth of information. You will learn about the importance of welcoming new workers to the job, as well as how to avoid the burnout that often comes along with the stress of being a shop steward. This month's edition also provides tips on making the most of grievance meetings and on interpreting contracts.

Once again, thank you for all you do for this union.

In Solidarity,

R. Thomas Buffenbarger
International President

