



February 2019

Stewards Are Organizers: Key to Mobilizing Members for Contract Campaigns

In recent years, Local 3328 DuPage County Probation has developed very effective contract campaigns in support of its collective bargaining goals. Now negotiating its sixth contract, the local works through a network of stewards, MAT activists and a Solidarity Committee that can act quickly to pressure management during negotiations. According to Chief Steward Brad Neely “the steward’s role is key in ensuring member participation.”

This month the local organized an action on February 14th: members wore green buttons in the shape of a Valentine’s Day heart. In other campaigns, they organized informational pickets and green shirt days, taking advantage of a shared lunch room with circuit court judges to demonstrate their support for their union. Stewards work closely with the MAT activist network to ensure the success of these and other high-profile demonstrations of worker solidarity. Stewards are organizers!

Tips for Effective Stewards: Advice to the New Steward

A steward’s first days and weeks are critically important. You must demonstrate to the membership that you can get the job done and you have to make your co-workers comfortable coming to you to resolve work related issues. At the same time, your supervisor and other management types are watching you and possibly testing you. You’re under close study by everyone. Here are a few guidelines to help.

Establish your position: Don’t keep it a secret that you’re the new steward. Don’t be boastful or smug about it, but let your co-workers know, and make it clear you’re there to help and expect them to come to you when problems come up. Give them your contact information – your phone number and email address – so they can reach you. You don’t want your members bypassing you by going directly to management or another union official. If the issue is something you need help with, you can always seek advice from others in the union leadership.

Don’t assume that the membership will automatically respect your abilities. Respect will be earned by showing that you can apply your knowledge to skillfully represent all members.

Management's Test: Management might test new stewards to see how well they represent their coworkers. The test can come in a variety of guises. It may be in the form of denying you reasonable time to carry out your duties or refusing to give you an extension of a time limit on a first step grievance. You supervisor may try in some ways to interfere with your investigation of a problem by denying access to records. Or the supervisor may simply say no to you at a grievance meeting, even though your member's complaint is a clearly a breach of the agreement.

Expect to be tested. Don't get angry or frustrated. Supervisors might try to incite a steward so they will blow the grievance meeting and lose the case. Don't lose your cool.

Represent the Rank and File: Always treat the members with respect and dignity. Work with them. Remember to say "we," not "I." The word "they" is always reserved for the employer, not the local union or the international. The union is the collective force of the membership, not simply a servicing center for dues-payers, and these terms should become second nature.

Always tell the truth. Sometimes you have to say no to a demand that you file a grievance. Be able to explain the reason for your decision and have an alternative strategy for the member.

Avoid Playing Favorites: Keep favoritism out of the grievance procedure. Don't let your personal feelings about a member cloud the way you represent him or her. When one group or member is pitted against another, everyone loses. Fair representation is a basic principle of unionism because it is right, the law requires it and the members have a right to expect it.

Build Solidarity: The steward can do a lot to build unity. In everything you do, you are setting an example to the rank and file that power is the union. Use your role every day to build the union. And get to new workers early. When new workers are hired, they are often given an extensive orientation from management that doesn't mention a single word about the role of the union. Not understanding the long struggle that went into winning the wages and benefits that currently exist, many of these new workers walk away believing that it all comes from the goodness of the employer's heart. A friendly piece of advice and support and a little history of the workplace and the role of the union will be remembered and appreciated. Sign them up as members right away.

A new steward has a lot on his or her plate...knowing what to expect will help build confidence and achievement. (*Adapted and reprinted with permission from Steward Update, Volume 20, Number 6. To subscribe, contact www.unionist.com.*)

Steward Resources: Grievance Information Sheet Explains Process to Potential Grievants

As stewards become more and more knowledgeable about their role, there is a natural tendency to assume that bargaining unit employees understand the grievance process as well. This is not always the case, particularly for non-members (potential members!) and members who have never filed a grievance before. If they do not have a good grasp of the process, they may have unrealistic assumptions about e.g., how long it

takes to work through each step of the grievance process, including arbitration, or that stewards may need to negotiate a settlement if the local determines that it is unlikely to receive a favorable arbitration decision.

To help grievants understand the process, stewards should provide copies of the attached Grievance Information Sheet to all bargaining unit employees who approach the steward about a workplace issue. Employees for whom we are filing grievances need to understand each step of the process, but we should also educate those employees to whom we have to explain that a grievance doesn't exist. We may be able to help them in other ways (organizing around a problem) but we should avoid simply letting members and non-members know that they don't have a grievance without explaining the process. Distribute the Grievance Information Sheet widely!

Going the Extra Mile: Council 31 Scholarships

AFSCME Council 31 is accepting applications through April 19 for its annual Larry Marquardt Scholarship. Children of AFSCME members who are high school seniors or college students under the age of 25 are eligible to apply, as well as AFSCME Council 31 members in good standing who plan to attend school full-time. Two winners will be awarded \$2,000 each. The scholarship honors Larry Marquardt, the first executive director of Council 31 and a tireless union organizer who dedicated his life to improving the lives of working people. Stewards should let members know about this opportunity; more information is available at www.afscme31.org/union-scholarships

Terms You Should Know: Last Chance Agreement

A grievance settlement that allows an individual to return to work, usually without back pay, but specifies that dismissal will be the penalty for any further wrongdoing. Arbitrators sometimes include a proviso in an award stating that a reinstated employee is being given a last chance.

Note: When writing last chance agreements, stewards should:

- Include a time limit (perhaps a year or two) as well as language to allow the union to grieve whether the employee committed the prospective infraction, even if the arbitrator has no authority to reduce the discipline if the employee is found guilty of the infraction.
- Always review last chance agreements with their Staff Representative.

Test Your Knowledge: The Steward's Role

As a union steward, it is likely that workers will come to you with a wide variety of requests:

True or False

1. Stewards should be the workplace expert on all personal and work issues
2. Stewards should help orient new employees and sign them up as members
3. Stewards should wait for the member to come to them with a problem
4. Stewards can help with contract negotiations

Answers are below

This Month in Labor History: Memphis Sanitation Workers Strike

Feb. 11, 1968: Memphis sanitation workers stage a walkout to protest unequal wages and working conditions imposed by Mayor Henry Loeb. At the time, Memphis paid African American workers significantly lower wages than white workers. There were no city-issued uniforms, no restrooms, no recognized union, and no grievance procedure for the numerous occasions on which they were underpaid. During Loeb's tenure as Mayor, conditions did not significantly improve, and the gruesome deaths of two workers in a garbage-compacting truck turned mounting tensions into a walkout and strike.

Dr. Martin Luther King later came to Memphis in support of the strikers, and in April gave his famous "I've Been to the Mountain Top" speech at the Mason Temple. He was assassinated the next day.

Answers to "The Steward's Role"

True or False

1. Stewards should be the workplace expert on all personal and work issues

False. It is not necessary to be a trained counselor. Workers frequently bring personal problems to stewards because such problems affect their work. Stewards can handle the job part of it, for instance, if a worker is disciplined for too many absences because of a family problem. But you should refer the worker to a trained professional for help with the family problem itself. (For State of Illinois and some local government members, that would be the Personal Support Program.) Some employers do make available other employee assistance programs, but members need to feel comfortable about confidentiality. Your local union or the community service section of your local AFL-CIO might be able to provide referrals.

2. Stewards should help orient new employees and sign them up as members

True. Many new hires are never approached to join the union. Stewards can play a vital role in an organized approach to signing up all new employees from day one. They should connect with a new employee after their orientation or during their first week. They should help new employees understand the union and their new workplace so that the new employee views the steward as the source of what's happening in their job. Early contact is the key to developing a relationship and recruiting new employees as active members.

3. Stewards should wait for the member to come to them with a problem

False. If stewards wait for the member to come to them with a problem, they will not gain the respect of the bargaining unit employees or the management they must deal with. Members are usually not as aware of contract violations and grievable issues as the steward. In addition, problems can often be resolved before they expand into grievances.

4. Stewards can help with contract negotiations

True. Stewards can play an important role in contract negotiations in two ways. Carefully reviewing the contract for potential violations can make stewards aware of weak or confusing language that union leaders and negotiators should also be made aware of. And of course, stewards play a key role in mobilizing member support for actions during contract campaigns, e.g., organizing informational pickets, button days, etc. (See story about Local 3328 above!)

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