

Unions and Stewards

Introduction

This section will explain what a Shop Steward is, including the Steward's place in the union, their main duties and responsibilities, and some of the challenges and rewards that come with the position. It begins by describing the structure of your Local, the Yukon Employees' Union, and our 'parent' union the Public Service Alliance of Canada.

Understanding Your Place in the Union

Unions are organized into groups of workers who typically share either a single employer or a single workplace. This group is known as a 'Local', and is referred to with a numbered code. For example, workers at the Yukon College are Local Y011, the employees with the Yukon Hospital Corporation are Local Y025, and both municipal and territorial government workers in Dawson City, even though they have different employers, are grouped together in the 'Klondike Collective' – Local Y043. See a current list of all the Locals with Yukon Employees' Union on our website. A Local is the basic unit of organization within a union, and it is the group you will be working most closely with as a Local Shop Steward.

At each workplace there is a division between the management staff and the 'bargaining unit' employees. In smaller operations the management might consist of a single CEO or business owner, but more often there is a hierarchy of Executive Directors, Divisional Directors, Managers, Human Resource Specialists, and sometimes Supervisors, all of whom represent the employer's interests in the workplace (i.e. they are in charge of hiring and firing, directing staff to perform various tasks, disciplining employees, etc.). These positions are not a part of the union – they are not covered by a collective agreement, they do not pay union dues, and they do not participate in union activities.¹ The bargaining unit usually consists

¹ Importantly, some of the first-level supervisory positions in large workplaces ARE included in the union. Although their job descriptions include directing and supervising other staff members, they

of all non-management employees in the workplace.² Their wages, benefits, and working conditions are negotiated by union members and guaranteed in a written contract between the union and the employer known as a 'Collective Agreement' (CA). All members of the bargaining unit pay union dues and have the right to representation from the union. However, only those who have signed a membership card can run for a union office or vote in union elections. This is important because unions are democratic at all levels; signing a membership card gives you the opportunity to play a part in the overall direction and activities of the union. Members of the bargaining unit who have not signed a membership card are known as "Rands."³ While Rands benefit from the activities of the union, they don't get a vote in setting the union's direction. All of the union members in the bargaining unit make up the Local.

Each Local has an internal organization. At an Annual General Meeting the members elect an Executive Board usually consisting of a President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, and Chief Shop Steward. Larger Locals may have a 2nd Vice President or an Assistant Chief Shop Steward, as well as several Directors. The Local has a set of bylaws governing these executive positions and regulating such things as elections and discipline. The Local will typically also have its own budget, though all major expenses such as maintaining a strike fund, hiring a negotiator, and contracting mediation and/or arbitration, are covered not by the Local but by the larger union it is a part of.

When it is first formed, the members in a Local elect a bargaining team to represent the collective interests of the bargaining unit. This team works with a trained

join together with the employees they supervise in negotiating working conditions with the employer. Sometimes the division between bargaining unit staff and management staff is not obvious, but if you are curious about where the divide lies in your own workplace you can usually find it by looking at the back of your collective agreement. Any positions listed in a wage grid are part of the Bargaining Unit.

² Some positions require access to information that would compromise their membership in the union, and so they are not in the bargaining unit either. These are known as 'exclusions' or 'excluded positions'.

³ After Justice Ivan Rand, who in 1954 settled an arbitration dispute by ruling that all bargaining unit employees would have dues 'checked off' of their pay regardless of whether they chose to become active members of the union representing them. For more on the "Rand Formula" see <http://psac-ncr.com/union-dues-rand-formula>.

negotiator from the larger union to settle the terms of a CA with the employer. Your CA is a contract laying out the terms of employment for all bargaining unit members, and it typically lasts 2-4 years before being renegotiated through another round of bargaining with the employer. While a CA is in effect, the union agrees not to organize a strike or work stoppage, and the employer agrees not to lock out employees. Instead, the CA lays out a grievance process for resolving disputes. Should the employer and the union reach an impasse over a dispute, the matter can be settled by a neutral arbitrator who hears both sides and renders a binding decision.

Very few Locals are able to generate all the support they need to adequately function on their own, and so there is a need for Locals to group together. The Yukon Employees' Union (YEU) has the largest collection of Locals in the territory. As of early 2016 YEU is comprised of 26 Locals with a combined total of over 5000 members, but these numbers change as some Locals merge and new workplaces are organized. Other unions operating in the Yukon include the Canadian Union of Postal Workers (CUPW), the Yukon Teacher's Association, and the United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters, to name a few. For the same reason that individual Locals find more effectiveness by banding together under YEU, the Yukon Employees' Union is a 'component' of a larger, national union known as the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC). It is PSAC that maintains a strike fund to pay workers in Locals that need to go on strike, that employs professional negotiators to work with Local bargaining teams, and that pays for arbitration when a CA is breached and the grievance process is unable to resolve the issue. PSAC also offers training and other benefits to all its members. Details can be found on their website. Like the Locals, Both YEU and PSAC (at the regional and national levels) have their own organizational structure with elected executive members. Volunteers do almost all of the work at the Local level and are also involved with the YEU and PSAC executive boards. In addition, YEU and PSAC have full time paid staff to manage union affairs.

If you are reading this, chances are that you are an employee at one of the unionized workplaces in the Yukon, and a member of one of the Locals. Your Local is a part of YEU, which is a component of PSAC. So, while you belong to a particular Local under YEU, the union that you belong to is PSAC.

Understanding this organizational structure is important to your role as a Shop Steward because you must always remember that a Steward is an agent, or a representative, of the union within a Local. In your activities as a Steward, you are acting not just on behalf of your fellow co-workers in the immediate workplace, but on behalf of the regional YEU, and of the national PSAC. This means that you have the backing and support of a powerful organization (PSAC has over 170,000 members), but it also means that your conduct as a Shop Steward reflects back on the entire union. This responsibility shouldn't be a deterrent, but it does mean that the union has an interest in training and preparing you for your activities as a Steward.

The Duties and Responsibilities of a Shop Steward

A. Why do we need Stewards?

Having active Shop Stewards in the workplace is incredibly important to the overall health of the union, for at least two reasons. First, organizing a workplace is not an activity that can be done once and then left in place. Workplaces are fluid, with employees coming and going. Even when the workforce is relatively stable, people do not naturally continue to think about and participate in union activities without regular reminders. Stewards do some of this ongoing organizing work, even if it is simply by publicly identifying themselves as a union representative to their co-workers. With an identifiable Steward, members have a visible presence of the union at their workplace, they know that there is someone to talk to about workplace conflicts or complaints about working conditions, and there is a 'go-to' person for general union-related questions. Without a Steward in the workplace, it becomes easy to forget about the union's presence altogether, or to think of the union as some 'other' group of people.

The second reason that Stewards are so important is that CAs do not simply enforce themselves. After a long round of bargaining and hard negotiations, when a contract is finally ratified, the temptation is to relax and assume that the employer will always follow the CA. While it would be nice if that were the case, it often is not. When there is an active Shop Steward in the workplace who makes it his/her job to know the details of the CA and keep co-workers informed about their rights,

violations of that CA will be noticed quickly and resolved through the proper channels. With no Shop Steward present there is often no one in the workplace who knows the contents of the CA well enough to recognize when some of the provisions are not being met, or who knows what to do about it when it is discovered.

B. What do Stewards do?

The full role and responsibilities of the Shop Steward position will be developed throughout this Handbook, and a very brief overview can be gained from a Getting Started Guide available online and at the Union Hall. For now, keep in mind that Shop Stewards are primarily *representatives* in the Local, and this in two senses.

First, Shop Stewards are representatives of the union they belong to; in our case, of PSAC. They are sometimes referred to as the “face of the union” in the workplace. Often, a Shop Steward is the first point of contact that general members have with the union, and sometimes they are the only one. This representational role involves activities like:

- **Explaining the basic organization and activities of the union.** Most of our members understand that they are part of a unionized workforce, but many of them have a pretty vague notion of what that really means. As a Local Shop Steward you may have members asking you to explain why the union matters, or what the union does for them, or how the union can help with workplace issues. You’ll want to have at least initial answers to questions such as these.
- **Encouraging Rands to sign a membership card.** Many Rand members are Rands simply because no one has explained the union to them and asked them to sign a card. As a representative of the union, a Steward should have a stock of membership cards handy and should encourage Rands to sign up.
- **Treating all members impartially and fairly.** The union has an obligation to fairly represent all of its members. This means that as a representative of the union, a Steward must be willing to set aside personal biases and treat all of his/her co-workers equally.

Second, Shop Stewards are representatives of their co-workers. When a member has a conflict or other issue in the workplace, a Steward's job is to represent that member's interests in looking for a solution to the problem. Representing members involves things like:

- When a member is called in to a disciplinary meeting with management, a Shop Steward will be present to take notes and ensure the process is followed fairly.
- When a member is treated in a way that breaches the CA, employer policy, established past practice, or labour legislation, a Shop Steward will work with the member and with YEU staff to present a grievance (a formal complaint) to the employer.
- Sometime members have workplace conflicts not with management, but with other members. In this type of case each of the two members is typically represented by a different Shop Steward (or other union representative).

These representative roles are the primary functions of a Shop Steward, but when time and interest permit there are several related ways that Shop Stewards can contribute to the union, including maintaining a union bulletin board in the workplace or working with a bargaining team to keep members updated on important issues.

Is This for Me?

Not everyone is cut out to be a Shop Steward. While we will never discourage your willingness to help, there may be a better role for you to play. The reality is that in order to succeed as a Steward, you will need to exemplify certain characteristics. Some of the qualities of a good Shop Steward:

- **You are generally looked up to and trusted by your colleagues.** This can be a difficult thing to be honest about, but if your co-workers will not feel comfortable approaching you for help with workplace issues, you will find it very difficult to be effective. There may come a time when collective

action is required (e.g. a supervisor has begun denying vacation requests without reason or explanation and you want everyone affected to sign a group grievance); in such a case will your co-workers follow your lead?

- **You have a genuine desire to make a positive difference.** Serving as a Shop Steward will require that you volunteer some of your time,⁴ often to resolve issues that won't affect your own working conditions in any way. Often your hard work will not be recognized or appreciated by those involved. You may need to assist a co-worker that you do not like very much. You might even be blamed or verbally abused when, despite your best efforts, things do not go the grievant's way. The work can be very rewarding, but you'll need to be the sort of person that can take satisfaction in championing a good cause, even when no one seems to notice.
- **You are committed to learning.** A Shop Steward needs to know the CA, the general grievance process, and the basics of how the union operates, but there is also much more that will strengthen you in your role. This includes principles of conflict resolution, economics, politics, and case law. The union offers training in a variety of formats but if you aren't interested in learning more, then you'll find it difficult to be an effective Steward.
- **You are able to keep a cool head under pressure.** There is a process in place to resolve workplace conflicts, and a Steward's job is to follow that process professionally. At times you may be targeted by folks with a grudge against the union, blamed by an upset co-worker who expected you to meet his unreasonable demands, or even intentionally provoked by management to test if you can be intimidated. You'll want to be able to manage your emotions and use them wisely in the face of these pressures.

⁴ Although not as much as you might fear. All CA's include a provision guaranteeing the ability of a union representative to attend meetings with management and investigate urgent issues during work time. This does not mean you can leave your job at any time—the approval of your supervisor must be requested first. However, permission from your supervisor cannot be unreasonably withheld. If you think it is being unreasonably withheld, ask your Local president or Chief Steward to investigate. Also check your own CA under "Union Representatives" or "Union Leave" for details.

- **You are truthful.** Sometimes members get upset over a perceived injustice that in fact lies within the rights of management, and other times a CA fails to rule out practices that really are unfair. In cases such as these, a Steward needs to be able to clearly explain what the union can and cannot do to help, even when the news is disappointing. A Steward also needs to be truthful about his/her own limitations. Difficult cases can involve a lot of emotion and investment and a Steward needs to avoid burning out. Sometimes you will need to decline a request for help (by referring it to another Steward or to YEU Intake).

Benefits of Being a Shop Steward

As you explore whether the Shop Steward role is for you, don't forget to consider the benefits that come along with the position:

- **Respect.** The Shop Steward position is an honourable one, taken on voluntarily out of a desire to help one's co-workers. When it is done well, you will have the appreciation of those you work with, of the other activists and executive members of your Local, of the staff at YEU, and even of the supervisors and management staff you interact with.
- **Confidence.** In most of your interactions with your employer and its representatives, you are expected to take a deferential attitude. In contrast, when you engage management in your official role as a Shop Steward, with the backing of the union behind you, you stand on equal footing and interact as peers. This can be very empowering.
- **A Break from the Work Routine.** Stewards are entitled to represent members at meetings and to processes complaints and grievances on paid work time. Stewards also get leave for training purposes and are compensated for loss of salary and expenses.
- **Personal Development and Transferable Skills.** Your training and experiences as a Steward result in skills in conflict resolution, negotiation, critical thinking, and defending contractual obligations. These skills are

useful in any number of areas of your day-to-day life (they will make you a better parent, for example!), and they make very valuable additions to your resume. Being a Steward also provides opportunity to learn about labour relations, law, politics, and economics, among other things.

- **Camaraderie.** Nothing brings people together like a shared purpose. As a Steward, you will have many opportunities to network with other folks who share your workplace concerns, and who can be counted on as allies.

Conclusion

This section of the Shop Steward's Handbook explained the organizational structure of your union, and where Stewards fit into that picture. It should also have given you enough information to begin exploring whether you'd be a good fit for the position.