

Representing the Union

Introduction

Every union relies on the collective strength of its members for its basic functioning. Without the ability to present a united front, most workers simply have very little bargaining power to negotiate with management. In fact, without the support of the general membership, unions cannot even organize themselves to the point of electing leaders or agreeing on bargaining demands. At the same time, unionized workplaces do not simply organize themselves. Most union members will not become involved in union activities without being actively invited or engaged by a union representative. There is a pressing need, then, for representatives to be actively promoting the union in our workplaces.

Engaging our members (“building solidarity” to use the traditional term) is not a job that falls to a Shop Steward alone, but is something that every active member must take a part in. Still, it is a part of a Shop Steward’s role to be one of the active representatives of the union in the workplace. As a Shop Steward, your co-workers will naturally turn to you when they have questions about the union, and this presents a great opportunity to build some support. In this section we will consider some ways that Shop Stewards can promote the union in the workplace, keeping in mind that most of these responsibilities are ones that you’ll share with other members, including your elected Local executive board

Maintaining a Visible Union Presence in the Workplace

Each workplace should have visible reminders of the union’s presence. These reminders demonstrate that the union is active in their own workplace, and also provide an invitation to become more involved. As a Shop Steward, there are a few things you might consider doing to contribute:

- **Identify yourself:** First, you want to clearly identify yourself as a Shop Steward to your co-workers. You cannot be an effective Steward if no one in your workplace knows that you are serving in that capacity! Post a notice on your bulletin board, making sure that your co-workers are able to contact you with questions or concerns. Consider adding a photo if you are in a large workplace. While posting a notice is a good invitation for folks to come to you when they have issues, you should also look for more active ways to introduce yourself. For this, nothing is as effective as a face to face conversation. Make a point of regularly touching base with each of the people you work with to ensure that they know that you are able to assist with workplace issues. The best approach is to just be upfront about it: “As the Local Shop Steward I like to keep in touch with everyone about working conditions and union matters. How is work going for you? Do you have any questions about the union or what it does for you?” It is particularly important for you to introduce yourself to new employees, keeping in mind that this might be their first experience in a unionized workplace and they might have no idea what a ‘Shop Steward’ is.
- **Wear Union Swag:** Another simple thing you can do is to make a point of using ‘Union Swag’. Drink your coffee from a mug with the YEU logo, use YEU pens, and wear a YEU toque to and from work. Doing this demonstrates that you are a union supporter and can provide opportunity for your co-workers to ask about the union.
- **Establish a relationship with management:** Consider informing your supervisor that you have been sworn in as a Shop Steward. In larger organizations like the Yukon Government and the City of Whitehorse, your immediate supervisor is likely a union member as well and will (hopefully!) be supportive. In these cases, you might also introduce yourself to the first non-bargaining-unit manager. You will likely be requesting leave for union business from your supervisors and may be presenting grievances to them in the future. Introducing yourself up front can show that you are interested in maintaining a good working relationship.
- **Maintain the Bulletin Board:** In addition to making your position known to the people you work with there is a need for building general union

support. One way that unions keep in contact with members is with a Union Bulletin Board. Check the details in your own CA, but in most cases the employer is required to provide a bulletin board dedicated to union materials in each work area. This board should be clearly identified, should be free from non-union materials, and should be regularly updated with notices about bargaining concerns, the union's perspective on current issues, and posters reminding members about union activity. The bulletin board is easy to ignore when it gets cluttered with material or never gets updates, so it is important to regularly clean it up and cycle fresh posters. Maintaining the board doesn't need to be your job. Someone else in your Local might already be doing it, but if not it is a great job for you to delegate to someone; ask one of your co-workers if they would take charge of it.

- **Union Orientation for New Employees:** New employees should be scheduled for an introduction to the union along with their initial training and orientation (check your CA for details). This is often conducted by a member of the Local executive board, but if you notice it being missed altogether you should ask your President or Chief Steward about it, and consider volunteering to perform this orientation yourself. New employees should get a basic overview of what the union is and what it does, and get an opportunity to sign a membership card. A supply of membership cards is included in your Steward's Binder, and more are always available from the Union Hall.
- **Word of Mouth:** Finally, make a point of informing your co-workers about union activities and achievements through casual conversations. When you assist a member by winning a grievance, let others know about it and celebrate with you (so long as you have the member's permission!).

Monitoring Workplace Practices and Policies

Shop Stewards are the eyes and ears of the union in the workplace. Part of representing the union is monitoring working conditions and employer policies to ensure conformity to the CA. While all of our members are entitled to a copy of the CA, very few of them read it until or unless they feel that they have been treated

unfairly. This can lead to situations in which terms of the CA are violated without anyone noticing. Stewards should be performing a 'watchdog' function, monitoring employer practices and carefully considering new rules or policies. As before, this is not a job that falls to the Steward alone; you should be enlisting the help of as many members in your workplace as you can by encouraging them to read their CA, to talk to you about parts that are unclear, and to make sure it is being followed.

Working conditions can change frequently with changes in supervisors and with new policies coming down from upper management. Be prepared to be extra vigilant when a new supervisor is hired, and get into the habit of reading new policies, directives, and guidelines carefully to ensure that they are in line with the provisions the union has already negotiated.

Responding to Opposition

This may come as a surprise, but not everyone is a fan of unions. Once you identify yourself as a Shop Steward, you should be prepared for some folks to be less than enthusiastic. Here are some things to keep in mind:

- You are not expected to have an answer to every challenge, nor are you expected to always respond to someone with a gripe against the union. Engaging with someone just looking to start an argument is almost never productive. Often your best response is to refer the person to someone else: "I'm not really sure what I think about that, but why don't you give some folks at the Union Hall a chance to respond to your issues?"
- Often, discontentment with the union stems from misplaced expectations. Perhaps a member who has been paying dues for a long time wants to drive the new work truck instead of the old one he keeps being assigned to, and expects the union to make it happen. Remind such folks that the union fights to protect the interests we all share in common, but not always individual preferences. Even if the union were able to affect decisions such as work truck assignments, it could put one member into the new truck only by removing another member from it. That just isn't the sort of thing anyone should expect from the union.

- It is helpful to distinguish between “in principle” objections to unionization, and “in practice” objections. When you get down to it, very few employees really think that we should all just trust employers to set fair working conditions and be thankful for what they choose to offer us. Unions exist in order to give working people an opportunity to bring their concerns to the table and negotiate fairly with employers. It is hard to give a thumbs-down to that! So, most objections are not against the very idea of unionizing (i.e. they aren’t an objection to unions, in principle). Instead, most objections are directed at some way that unions operate. Someone may not like the way that dues are collected, for example. The first thing to say about these objections is always the same: It is YOUR union. If you don’t like some way that the union operates, and if you can think of a better way to do it, then as a voting union member you have as much opportunity as anyone else to make changes. Instead of just allowing these folks to complain, challenge them to do something about the things they don’t like, such as attending meetings called by the Local or nominating themselves for a position on the executive.

There are many reasons that someone might be opposed to the union, and they are often worth addressing head-on instead of sweeping under the carpet. Keep a notebook for issues that members ask about or challenge you on, and plan to share them with other Stewards in our network. By collaborating with others we will shape our own opinions, and also be better prepared to respond to union negativity.

Organizing your Workplace

When unionists talk about “organizing a workplace”, they are usually referring to a previously non-union workplace becoming unionized for the first time. A “Union Organizer” is someone working for a union, whose job is to create new Locals by enabling a group of non-union employees to join the union. Unfortunately, this gives the impression that ‘organizing’ is a one-time event occurring at the creation of a new Local, and that the organization put into place when a Local is created will naturally continue on indefinitely. These impressions are misleading. Once a workplace becomes organized there is always a need for it to stay actively organized, and this does not just happen on its own. A Shop Steward has a closer

connection to the members in his/her own workplace than any union staff or executive member, and is therefore uniquely positioned to keep those members connected. A few ways that a Steward can take part in keeping their workplace organized:

- Keep an updated list of employees in your workplace, the departments they work in, and the supervisors they report to. This can help the union identify areas that need more visible union presence. For example, if a group of the employees you work with rarely spend time in the room containing the Union Bulletin Board, there may be better ways to communicate with them. It will also help us identify members to talk to about specific working conditions. For example, if one member complains about the way a new supervisor is processing leave requests, it will sometimes be useful to know the other members reporting to that supervisor, to see if they are being treated the same way.
- Identify natural leaders in the workplace. In any group of humans there are some folks that others look up to, whose opinions seem to be widely respected, and who would be followed if they decide that something needs to be done. Those are the people that could potentially make strong union advocates. You don't need to attempt to recruit them for union activities if you aren't comfortable doing so, but if you can identify them as natural leaders or potential recruits and make a note of it, then other union members will know who to approach
- Make sure you know the members of your Local executive board, and facilitate communication between them and the members in your workplace. You can keep the officers aware of issues in your workplace, and keep your co-workers aware of Local meetings, AGMs, and activities.
- When your CA is due to expire, the members will elect a bargaining team who will request input ('bargaining proposals') from everyone else. This is a very important opportunity for everyone to evaluate their working conditions and propose improvements. As a Shop Steward, you can make a point of communicating to your co-workers that this is their chance to address things not covered by the current agreement. Bargaining teams always have to prioritize items for bargaining, and will require input from

the membership on the relative importance of the various proposals. Encourage your co-workers to participate in surveys and questionnaires.

- A Steward can also act as a liaison between the members in your workplace and the staff with YEU and PSAC by distributing printed materials from the union, inviting members to participate in training courses, and keeping on top of social and political issues the union is involved with locally, territorially, and nationally.

Conclusion

Assisting individual co-workers with workplace issues is an intimidating enough task on its own, and adding to it the role of representing the union likely seems overwhelming and unrealistic. Keep in mind that you are one member of a large team, and no one expects you to take charge of everything described in this section. The information is given only as a guide for you to help out where you can, and for everyone to better recognize when more support is needed to keep the Local strong.