

Your Role as Steward: In-Depth

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YOUR ROLE AS STEWARD (PART II)

Now you have the facts and management's early response. If there's no agreement, what's next?

"Grievances should never be confused with your chief responsibility as a steward: *to build a united, organized, and involved membership in your workplace.*"

Remember? You read that on page 1.

So all your work so far (interviewing workers, investigating, meeting with the supervisor) is simply preparation for *involving the members*.

You take the problem, together with all you've learned, to the members. Why?

SEIU believes that all union power derives from the involvement and commitment of the members.

- **Solving problems on the job depends far more on the courage and unity of the members than on our claims or arguments. If the union members don't really care, management will know it. Count on it.**
- **The same is true for negotiating good contracts or obtaining fair labor laws. No matter how "well" we bargain or lobby, if our members are apathetic or**

divided, we will lose.

That's why your job is to *mobilize* the membership around the issues that affect their lives. You do this in two major ways:

Communicating. If your members don't know what's going on, they can't very well mobilize and they can't make decisions. As stewards, we're working *for* the members. That's why it's our job to keep them *informed*. How? Any way you can. The best way is continuing, two-way, one-on-one, face-to-face communication with every member at breaks, at lunch, and when you're working. You should also have meetings. *Regular* meetings. Newsletters. Use those bulletin boards we negotiated to get (but not as a substitute for personal contact). Post notices and facility updates on your local Web site and create group email lists as a way to keep your members informed. Do whatever it takes. Be creative.

If stewards and other leaders fail to tell the members what's going on, you'll soon find yourself in serious pain. If you've never seen a bargaining unit torn by doubts, wild rumors, resentment, bad morale, cynicism, and warring factions, take our word for it: It's ugly.

Worse yet, you'll be losing out on the accumulated experience and knowledge of your members--which is probably your greatest resource.

Some workers won't volunteer even if they have important things to say. It's up to you to reach out.

Action. As you'll see on the following pages, there are *many* ways the union can solve problems other than formal grievances. It's up to the members to decide, but it's your job to suggest courses of action based on your investigations and problem-solving experience.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

When you involve the members in solving problems or winning improvements, a lot of avenues open up.

Of course, mobilizing your members requires continuing, direct personal communication with every worker, but as an SEIU steward you already know that.

1. **Just involving the members** can sometimes bring management to a solution. And when the members are involved, management will know it, even if they pretend not to.
2. If management chooses to play dumb, showing *unity* through workplace actions (petitions, rallies, "button days," for example) can exert a lot of pressure where it counts.
3. **Organizing community support** can tip the balance. This is where your coalition partners (churches, teachers, community action people) can exert some (or a lot of) leverage.
4. With member support, you have a better chance of getting your message to the *news media*. You'll be able to generate good publicity about the union and the work your members do if you're able to push the right buttons. (Push the wrong ones and this can boomerang right back on you.)
5. **Elected officials** can sometimes be induced to twist management's arm(s). That's one reason we have our political action programs. Politics affects everything we do as workers, and everything we receive (or don't receive) from government.
6. **Government agencies**. This generally takes approximately forever, but the threat of government red tape can sometimes frighten the most ferocious employer.

THE STEWARD AS EDUCATOR

As a steward, you have an opportunity to educate our members every time you come in contact with them. You will want to make sure members know enough to participate in making union policy, that they know where the union came from and where it is heading. Members need to know how the union makes decisions and carries them out, what its policies are, and what the challenges are that the union and its members are facing. Educated members support the union when it fights for improvements and defend the union when it is under attack.

One thing to remember is that education for our members is not what you think of as traditional teaching. *Education for union members is action-oriented.* Union members learn

- by sharing their experience,
- accomplishing tasks,
- analyzing and discussing what has happened.

This means it can happen any time, anywhere. Take the time to explain the union's political program while gathering together a crew to staff phone banks one night. Or talk about worker solidarity when the members have won an important grievance fight through workplace demonstrations. Even when you lose a grievance, there can be a lesson on the importance of fighting for better language in upcoming contract negotiations.

Keep Members Informed. Keeping members informed is one of the most important parts of your job as educator. Make sure members know what the union is doing--

and make sure the union leadership knows what the membership thinks about what the union is doing. Letting members know when a meeting or other union activity is taking place is an important part of your job. Explaining the reasons for the meeting or the activity and how it fits into the overall union program is another opportunity to be an educator.

Getting members involved in local union and the International's campaigns to protect workers' rights and to maintain decent standards of living in the community is also an educational activity.

Develop Leadership. The steward develops leadership by getting members to help with the work of the union. Ask people to volunteer for union committees or union action programs. Take note of the useful skills people have. If someone isn't ready for a committee, give him or her a specific task--but be sure you discuss what the task means and why doing the task is good for the union.

Recommend Training. Keep track of the kinds of grievances and concerns members bring up, and let the local leadership know what training programs are needed. Ask the state council or the regional staff to run health and safety programs if there are dangerous work stations or indoor air problems. The local can also request anti-racism or anti-sexual harassment training from the International if there are complaints or if cronyism leads to favoritism on the shop floor. The local union offers steward training. And the International union offers Train-the-Trainer workshops to teach local staff and leaders how to conduct training programs.

Visit SEIU's [Online Learning Center](#). The Online Learning Center offers three interactive workshops members, active staff representatives and officers. Learn about your legal rights as a steward and how to cost on a contract.

THE STEWARD AS POLITICAL ORGANIZER

Many of our rights and benefits are negotiated at the bargaining table and included in our contracts. Much of your role is making sure that contract is enforced at the workplace.

But nowadays our communities are bigger than they used to be, major changes happen almost overnight, and no person or organization can exist as an island. Like it or not, society is more and more interdependent all the time, and so are we.

A lot of what *all* workers have today (overtime pay, food and drug laws, Medicare, Social Security, health and safety regulations, even the public education system) we wouldn't have had without political action by organized labor.

As a steward, sooner or later you'll be working with coalition partners. Which, depending where you are, can be almost anybody--other unions, civil rights and civil liberties organizations, community activists, ethnic groups, social or charitable organizations, political coalitions, whatever.

There are many rights and benefits that are determined by laws passed at the national, state, or local level. To protect our members' interests, the union must be involved in electing candidates who will pass and enforce laws which will increase and protect our rights and benefits.

That will not happen without you.

Many SEIU members are public employees, or work in positions funded through government agencies, so politics is especially important to us. When politicians cut services, everyone loses the services, but some of us lose our jobs.

Our success in building a strong political organization that stands up for our members' interests depends on you and your ability to mobilize our members. SEIU depends on you, the steward, to get the workers involved in political and legislative action. You know the members, you see them every day at work, and you're persuasive enough to get things rolling (or you wouldn't be a steward).

Think of what you can do at your workplace or in your community that will make a difference.

Register voters. It's simple. If you aren't registered, you can't vote. Learn the procedure for voter registration in your district. Then act to make sure your members register. Better yet, recruit members to participate in a voter registration drive.

GOTV (Get Out The Vote). Make phone calls, or recruit other members to participate in phone banks and other activities before an election.

Educate the members. Talk to your members (and listen) about candidates and issues. Keep them informed about the election. Become informed about SEIU's political and legislative program that fights to "Reclaim America" for our jobs, rights, and quality of life so you can educate and involve your members.

☐ **Raise money.** Money talks. If our candidates are going to be competitive, they need money. Raising money for SEIU's COPE, our union's political action committee, is one way to do it. Signing up members for COPE checkoff (deducted directly from their paychecks) is one way, if you have the right to do it. Other ways include raffles, drawings, picnics and casino nights. (There are federal and state rules for raising political funds, such as being able to ask only SEIU members and their families for contributions. Learn the rules. They are simple and straightforward, but they are the rules.)

☐ **Lobby.** Win or lose on Election Day, someone is going to take office, and we are going to have an interest in the laws they pass or enforce. It might involve striker replacement, Medicare, safety and health, or a hundred other issues, but one thing is sure: Our members will be affected. Help stage a rally. Get petitions signed. Organize letter-writing and postcard campaigns. Lead a delegation to lobby officials.

☐ **Form labor/community coalitions.** Remember, unity is strength. Unions and community groups share a commitment to strengthen our society and communities. Participate in coalitions to build legislative and political power.

Your role in building your union's political and legislative power is important. It can also be rewarding and fun.

IMPORTANT NOTE

Unfortunately, in some states our public sector members do not yet enjoy the rights of full political participation. Laws known as "Hatch Acts" or "Little Hatch Acts" restrict the political rights of public employees and vary from state to state. Check with your local union for details. However, all members have some rights to participate.

THE STEWARD AS ORGANIZER

Stewards also play a key role in recruiting new members. This is perhaps the most important thing the union does, because the more workers the union represents in your own industry, the more power the union has and the better it can represent you. The more workers that are organized in an industry, the higher wages and benefits will be for all.

And it's vitally important that you succeed. Your union will thrive only to the extent that other workers in your industry, your agency, or your geographic area are organized.

If you work in an open shop, you'll be doing "internal" organizing. This requires convincing the free riders to join the union.

But if you've done all the other things you've read about in this booklet--especially your role in making the union a vital presence in the workplace--then you've already done most of the hard work. Build the union and they will come.

But whether you have a union shop or open shop, you're bound to get involved in outside organizing. Why? Because as a worker and leader, you have the kind of credibility no paid organizer can match.

You know the work. You know the turf. You speak the workers' language. And you can see problems and potentials that outsiders can only guess at.

In an organizing campaign, you and other member-organizers are worth your weight in gold. And the more workers you organize in your industry, the more power you will have to fight for better pay, benefits, and respect. If your local union finds itself an isolated island in a sea of unorganized and exploited workers, it won't be around very long.

THE STEWARD AS HEALTH & SAFETY ACTIVIST

Worksite health and safety is a crucial part of your job as a steward.

If your unit has a health and safety committee, it may be your job to help lead it. If you don't have one, better start one.

There was a time when occupational health and safety meant hard hats and machine guards, but no more. The problems many SEIU workers face are widespread, increasingly complex, and often highly technical.

Office work was once thought to be completely safe and healthy. Asbestos, radon, carpal tunnel syndrome, video display terminals, and indoor air pollution have laid that myth to rest, along with a lot of workers.

That's where you come in. As a steward, you'll have an important responsibility to organize around health and safety. If you find you need help, you can get all the

assistance you need from the SEIU Health and Safety Department or its regional coordinators in your area. Give them a call.

Here's a little "bill of rights" for workers the SEIU Health and Safety Department finds useful:

- ☐ Workers have a right to a safe and healthy workplace. The law says the employer must provide a safe place to work. It doesn't say anything about the cost.
- ☐ Workers have a right to information about workplace hazards, substances they are being exposed to, and injuries and illnesses (OSHA 2000 Log).
- ☐ Workers exposed to chemicals, bloodborne diseases, hazardous materials, and certain other workplace hazards have the right to training on how to protect themselves.
- ☐ Workers have the right to bring in union health and safety specialists to help identify hazards in the workplace.
- ☐ Workers have the right to organize in order to secure protection from workplace hazards.
- ☐ Management has to post the OSHA 2000 Log--you need to check it, and make sure it's right.

THE STEWARD AS RETIRED MEMBER CONNECTION

SEIU really believes in keeping members involved in the union after they retire. The union needs all the help it can get, and retired members are the people with the experience. They've seen it all.

If your local union has a retired members club, you've probably seen them in action, especially in community service, picket lines, voter registration, and get-out-the-vote drives. (In political and organizing campaigns, retired members are *awesome*.)

As the person in daily contact with the members at the worksite, you can help a lot by letting the union know when workers are going to retire. That way, we can be sure to let them know about SEIU's retired members program.

Some things you and your local union should be doing:

- ☐ When a member is planning to retire, someone should personally let them know about the retired members program and invite them to join. SEIU has a lot to offer retired members & and retired members provide an important source of strength for the union.
- ☐ Don't forget, retired member dues can be checked off from pensions in most public systems and in some private plans.

If your local union needs help getting its retired member program rolling, just call the SEIU Retired Members Program. (And ask them for some of the "Sign Up Retired Members" kits while you're at it. It's got everything you need.)

THE STEWARD AS COMMUNICATOR

This may be your most important role. You are the vital link between the union and the members. It's up to you to explain to members what the union is, what it stands for, how it works, what its goals and programs are. And it's you who listens to members to find out what they feel and want, and then carries this information back to the union office.

Our studies have shown that today our members, like the general population, are reading less and less; and yet they value communication with the union more than ever. The best way to do this is to talk to the members personally.

THE STEWARD AS ADVOCATE

There will come a time when your role will be to represent workers in a grievance. Most contracts have similar definitions for what a grievance is. In general, the employer must have violated:

1. The contract.
2. Federal, state, or local law.
3. The employer's own rules or policies.
4. Past practice.
5. Equal treatment.

If you decide the employer has committed a violation, then you must next determine which (of the following two) categories of violation is involved:

DISCIPLINE GRIEVANCES If the employer has imposed discipline on a worker, the burden is on the *employer* to prove "just cause." Just cause for discipline is a requirement in most union contracts. Even if it isn't spelled out, most arbitrators require it.

ALL OTHER GRIEVANCES If no discipline is involved, then it's up to the *union* to prove the violation has occurred.

These different types of violations call for different approaches. You're doing more than investigating now. You're building a case.

- Did the employer investigate properly before imposing discipline? Or did they shoot from the hip? Where did they get their information?
- Was the investigation complete? Fair?
- Was the evidence convincing? Or was the worker punished on the basis of suspicion and hearsay?
- Did the worker receive fair and equal treatment? Was discipline imposed without bias or discrimination?
- Did the worker have reason to know an infraction was being committed? Are workers properly instructed on workplace rules and policies? Had any warnings been given by management?
- Has the violation been permitted or overlooked in the past? Is the punishment a sudden reversal of past policy?
- Did management apply "progressive discipline" ? It might be in your contract. If not, many arbitrators recognize the principle. For example:
 - Oral warning
 - Then a written warning

Checklist for Discipline Grievances «

- Did the employer investigate properly before imposing discipline? Or did they shoot from the hip? Where did they get their information?
- Was the investigation complete? Fair?
- Was the evidence convincing? Or was the worker punished on the basis of suspicion and hearsay?

- Did the worker receive fair and equal treatment? Was discipline imposed without bias or discrimination?
- Did the worker have reason to know an infraction was being committed? Are workers properly instructed on workplace rules and policies? Had any warnings been given by management?
- Has the violation been permitted or overlooked in the past? Is the punishment a sudden reversal of past policy?
- Did management apply "progressive discipline" ? It might be in your contract. If not, many arbitrators recognize the principle.

For example:

1. Oral warning
2. Then a written warning
3. Then a suspension
4. Finally, the ax

- Even if there was cause for some discipline, was it excessive? Were "mitigating" circumstances (such as long service or no previous discipline) ignored?
- Does the punishment fit the infraction?

Any of the questions above can be used to show the employer acted without just cause.

Checklist for Non-Discipline Grievances «

- Did the employer violate the contract? Such grievances often involve seniority, hours of work, pay, staffing, working conditions, holidays, and annual leave.
- Did the employer violate a law?
- Is it an infraction of the employer's own rules or responsibilities? This is often the case in health-and-safety grievances.

- Does it infringe the equal treatment guarantees of the workers?
- Does it violate past practice?