

STEWARD'S HANDBOOK

THE STEWARD

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this handbook is to give newly appointed stewards an outline of their duties, where they can turn for advice and the names of CUPE Education Department courses that will help them to be more effective. This handbook is an introduction to stewarding. It is not an exhaustive guide.

I - Introduction to Unions

The purpose of any labour union is to advance the interests of its members. Unions do this by negotiating collective agreements and by lobbying to improve laws that affect the membership. Unions also represent their members by seeing that employers do not violate their collective agreements or laws (health and safety, human rights, etc.) that affect the members.

Unions must force employers to do things that they would not otherwise do. Our employers want to have a free hand to provide public services as cheaply as possible. Union members must work together to force employers to pay more than the bare minimum, to provide safe working conditions, provide us with job security, etc.

Even at a time of cutbacks, wage freezes and contracting-out, unionized workers do better than those with no protection.

The difference between members of an effective union and unorganized workers, or members of a passive local, is the difference between bargaining and begging. The difference between bargaining and begging is the power to effect change. Unionized workers who act together and support one another have more power than individual workers who can't even complain about working conditions, harassment by supervisors, racism, or being passed over for promotions for fear of being labelled a troublemaker. Unorganized workers and members of weak locals can only hope that their employer will find other ways of saving money besides cutting their wages or laying them off.

In short, members of strong locals have a lot more say about what happens at work compared to workers with weak or nonexistent unions.

Unions are not insurance policies where you pay your dues and expect someone to solve your problems for you. Unions are self-help organizations where the members work together in order to solve common problems.

II - Role of the Steward

The steward is primarily a problem solver. "Solving" could mean mediating a dispute between two members, talking informally to a supervisor, submitting a written grievance, launching a complaint with the human rights commission, or referring the problem to the union Health and Safety or Bargaining Committee.

A steward builds confidence. A steward promotes mutual support. Confidence and mutual support are achieved when the steward involves the co-workers in the creative resolution of a member's problem or grievance. The steward encourages members to find solutions together by facilitating problem solving.

The steward is also the link between the membership and the leadership of the local. The steward should pass on important information about union activities and encourage membership involvement in union activities. He or she should also pass on complaints about the union to the local's executive.

Since effective stewards have a good understanding of the problems and concerns of the members they represent, they should be consulted about things such as proposed dues increases, bargaining proposals, political action campaigns undertaken by the local, pay equity plans, etc., so that the concerns of the membership are taken into account before any of these proposed activities are adopted.

III - Duties of Stewards

Problem Solving

- Introduce themselves and explain their function to all new members.
- Explain the role of the union to new members.
- Investigate all complaints made by members and attempt to solve all complaints.
- Keep accurate notes on all complaint investigations including those where no grievance is processed.
- If the collective agreement has been violated and no satisfactory solution can be negotiated informally, complete and submit a grievance form.
- Attend grievance hearing and act as an advocate for the griever.
- Attempt to deal with complaints that are not grievances with informal discussions with supervisors, union members, or members of the union executive.
- Act as a referral agent for members with personal problems such as alcoholism or spouse abuse.
- Initiate action when the contract has been violated even when there is no complaint.
- Keep the executive informed about all complaints and how each has been dealt with.

Bargaining

- Give the bargaining committee information about unresolved problems.
- Keep the members informed about important settlements made by locals that represent workers doing similar work.
- Encourage members to submit bargaining proposals, complete membership surveys and attend meetings where bargaining issues will be discussed.
- Pass on the members' bargaining priorities to the bargaining committee.
- Ensure that the members are informed about all membership meetings and about important issues (Dues increases, bargaining proposals, union schools, etc.) being discussed at these meetings.
- Inform members about the details of tentative agreements.

Union Representative

- Make regular reports to the grievance committee or the membership meeting about your activities and in particular about each of the complaints you dealt with since the last meeting.
- Keep the members informed about important decisions taken by the union and about all union activities.
- Encourage membership involvement in union activities.
- Pass on complaints about the union and about any barriers to union activity to the executive.
- Keep union bulletin boards up to date.

IV - Tips for Stewards**Building Support for the Union**

- Introduce yourself to all new employees and make sure they understand your function.
- Make sure that all the members you represent have a copy of the current collective agreement and understand their rights, ie. that they will not get into trouble if they complain about a supervisor.
- During informal discussions, ensure that members understand that specific contract provisions were negotiated by the union and not "given" by the employer.
- Keep the members informed about union activities by distributing notices of meetings, agendas, minutes of meetings, union publications, information about important grievances, contract settlements etc.

Handling Complaints

- Never turn anyone away that comes to you with a complaint. You may not think the problem is important but the person complaining probably feels differently. Listen carefully, take notes and ask questions to clarify the basis of the problem and the desired solution.
- Many complaints will be about fellow workers, about unfair distribution of work, about harassment by supervisors and about other problems that may not be direct violations of your collective agreement. You should try and solve these problems by informal discussions with the people involved, and by launching a grievance based on its own merit. Non-grievable complaints must be dealt with. Use problem solving techniques to address all complaints, that way union members will not lose faith in the union.

Grievances

- Use a "Grievance Fact Sheet" when completing and investigating any complaint. These forms, which are available from your CUPE Education Representative, list all of the questions that need to be answered before a grievance form is completed. The Fact Sheet also has a checklist of points to be covered before submitting a grievance.
- Before completing a grievance form, check your collective agreement and your provincial labour code to see what you must list on the grievance form.
- When completing a grievance form, write as little as possible aside from the requirements of the law and your collective agreement. The purpose of the grievance form is to trigger the grievance procedure. You will have a chance at a grievance meeting to submit all of the information you collected when completing the "Grievance Fact Sheet" so there is no need to go into detail on the grievance form itself.
- If you are not sure if a complaint can be grieved or which provisions of the collective agreement have been violated, check with a more experienced steward.
- Even if you are not sure that you have filled out a grievance form correctly, do a draft and show it to an experienced steward for their comments. You will never learn how to do a proper grievance form if someone else always does the writing.
- To gain experience and confidence, accompany an experienced steward to a grievance meeting with the employer.

And Finally

- All newly appointed stewards should be trained as soon as they are selected. Contact your CUPE Education Representative to find out when the next steward's training course is being held in your area.

V - Skills and Knowledge Required to be an Effective Steward

- Your Collective Agreement
- Parts of the Labour Relations Act that pertain to the rights of stewards and the right to fair representation
- Your local's By-laws
- CUPE's Constitution
- CUPE policy and structures
- Knowledge of how to complete Grievance forms
- Interviewing and communication skills
- Negotiating skills

VI - Sources of Advice and Assistance

- Other stewards
- Former stewards
- Members of the executive
- Your CUPE Representative
- CUPE Education Department Courses

VII - Relevant Education Department Courses

- *"Introduction To CUPE"*
A short course for newly selected executive members and stewards introducing them to CUPE and to effective union administration.
- *"Grievance Handling in the Workplace" (Effective Stewarding)*
This course is an introduction to stewarding. It was developed to give new stewards an outline of their duties and the basic knowledge needed to carry out each of these roles.
- *"Advanced Grievance Handling" (Advanced Effective Stewarding)*
This course was developed to give experienced stewards the skills to deal with the final steps in processing a grievance.
- *"Face to Face Communication"*
A course in how to communicate effectively. Useful for anyone who would like to have more effective listening and communication skills.
- *"Assertiveness Training"*
A course in how to present your ideas and proposals in a straightforward manner and how to deal with other people's ideas and criticisms. This is an excellent course if you are uncomfortable in conflict situations.

Contact your CUPE Education Representative for more information on these courses as well as other courses offered by the CUPE Education Department or by your Federation of Labour.

