

TAMI

E D U C A T O R

Update for Stewards

Vol. 9, No. 1



Leaving a Paper Trail

Leaving a Paper Trail

Let's face it. There isn't a steward in the world who wouldn't love to be able to resolve workplace problems in a single face-to-face meeting. No formal grievances filed. No hearing. Grievance made whole. Record clean.

If only it worked that way.

Much of the time we need to use the written word in letters or electronic mail. There are many reasons for committing our opinions and requests to paper. Chief among them is that the grievance procedure is a process that involves time and a number of individuals. At each point of the procedure, a union officer may need evidence to prove a point, and many of those records are in the employer's hands. Or the union may need to request the presence of a witness at a hearing. Or after talking to the member, the union may need an extension of the time limits for filing the grievance. All of these issues demand a written letter.

So here are some important hints on letter writing so that you clearly document your request or understanding.

1. Put it on letterhead if you have it. If not, create a top line with the union's names and address so that the employer knows it's union business.

2. If the union and the employer use emails or faxes for official communication, make sure that your note has a requested receipt so you have proof the employer received it. Most email programs allow you to put in a command for receipt. Your faxed note should also request an acknowledgment. In either case, you can also send or hand-deliver a hard copy saying that it is a second copy originally delivered by email (or fax) on

whatever date it was sent. Postal communications should be sent certified mail, return-receipt requested.

3. Date the letter. Along with a hand-stamp on the envelope, you will have proof of compliance with time limits.

4. Think carefully about the content. Letters can be used in evidence to support the grievance. For example, you may be requesting information. If it is withheld, then the union might enter the letter as evidence of the employer's non-compliance with procedures. Don't put anything in the letter that you might not want entered in the record.

5. Who is it sent to? Include the

full name and title of the employer officer who is to receive the letter. Don't chance anything by sending the letter to a title, without the proper name. Some grievances can be denied if it is sent to the wrong person. If you are not sure, check with your union and employer.

6. Why are you writing the letter? Explain the reason why you are making the request. You do not have to be so specific that you tip your hand. If you need attendance records of certain employees, you might give the reason that you are processing a possible grievance based on an employer charge of alleged attendance abuse.

7. Make sure that your exact request stands out from the rest of the letter. Use a separate paragraph for the request or put the request in boldface type.

8. If you have a series of requests, number each one. Do not run them together because it will give the employer an opportunity to skip some of the requests.

9. Give the employer a deadline. "Please respond to this request by March 3, 2011." If they do not, call them on March 4 to ask where is their response.

10. Include immediate contact information where you can be reached if the employer has a question. Include a cellphone number, an email address or the union phone number in the letter. And don't forget to check your voice mail or email. You do not want them to respond for further information by the mail. Time is too important.

11. Make sure you send a copy (cc) to whoever is necessary.

Depending on your union structure this could be the chief shop steward, the chief union grievance officer and/or president. And don't forget to send them the copy.

12. Create form letters for specific issues. It will make this process a little easier and help newer stewards who may not get the format down right. It also puts the employer on notice that the union takes the issue seriously. You can create forms for information requests, for example. You can include a checklist of what is requested on the form or you can print one up separately to which the steward can refer.

13. Think of using the union's website more creatively for this purpose. You can include downloadable form letters online in the two most accessible formats: Word and PDF. Simple software is available that will allow you to fill out the PDF forms online. You can then print out the completed form or save it to be sent as an attachment in an email. Don't forget to request a receipt in your email.

Whatever the reason for writing the letter — a grievance letter or appeal, an information request, a request for a time limit extension — it is important to keep copies of your documents and then pass them on to the next person on the grievance ladder when the grievance is appealed.

— Robert Wechsler. The writer is former education and research director for the Transport Workers Union.



The Steward as Organizer

As everyone who's ever held the job knows, a steward's duties can seem endless, and endlessly varied. Even then, though, a steward's work on behalf of the union can be summed up in a single word: organizer. A union steward needs to be the inside organizer for the workers he or she represents or intends to represent.

Too often, the role of the steward has been painted as being something akin to a semi-lawyer. This is wrong. A shop steward is not and should not be a lawyer, but rather someone who listens to co-workers; helps them solve problems; speaks on behalf of those who face injustices, and mobilizes people to address problems in the workplace and even beyond.

So, what should the steward-as-organizer be doing? Here are some basics.

Meet and ask.

Ask new workers to join the union. No matter what the situation regarding your union's ability to require membership, the steward should introduce him or herself to every new worker as soon as possible. Don't assume that the new worker has any idea what a union is. It is critical to walk through the basics and explain what the union does and why the new worker should join and get involved. Surveys have demonstrated time and again that a worker develops an opinion about a union within the first six to twelve months on the job.

Recruit volunteers.

It's important to be thinking about recruiting members to take on different union functions. All too often a local union relies on a small number of dedicated members rather than going out to increase the pool of people who can be asked to take on a task. Go about this the right way. Don't ask someone to do the biggest task possible (particularly if they have not been active), but rather find out what the mem-

ber might be willing to do. Even if it's just answering the phone at the union office for a couple of hours or sticking stamps on newsletters, that's great. You can build involvement from there.

Help solve problems.

This can mean several different things, including:

■ **Monitor the Contract.** Keep on top of how the contract is being implemented. Keep an eye out for violations. Make sure that members know when and how to file grievances.

■ **Talk through issues with workers.** Not every issue brought to you by a member will necessarily be a contract violation. In part because we live in a society that is full of lawsuits, many members expect immediate results, and they also assume that every problem necessarily represents a contract violation — and the union can “take care of it.” Thus, a steward needs to be especially good at listening and thinking through with the worker how best to proceed with resolving problems that can't be addressed as traditional grievances.

Continuously negotiate.

Negotiations over a collective bargaining agreement do not constitute the sum total of all bargaining that takes place. New issues can emerge with employers every day. Stewards need to be prepared to meet with management, generally a supervisor, to talk through problems as they emerge or as they are anticipated to emerge.

Educate Your Members.

Members do not want to be told what to think but they tend to look to the union to provide them with information and analysis. That means that a steward can play an invaluable role by offering reliable information on various topics. This could range from health and safety issues to politics. The steward might want to have workplace meetings where there are discussions about any number of issues,

beginning with job concerns. But the topics do not have to remain there. Be careful you don't violate any rules of the employer, though. For instance, a public employee union holding discussions about electoral politics in the workplace is generally out of bounds.

Organize and Mobilize.

The steward is a critical cog in the union's workplace awareness-raising machine when important issues arise. This means that in order to get things moving in a workplace and to carry out any real actions, the steward needs to be aware of who the key opinion-makers are among the workers so they can help spread the word. Figure out who the real rank-and-file leaders are — the central people in workplace groups. You will know them because they have followers. They are the people that workers tend to approach for support and advice. You — as the steward — need to meet and get to know these individuals and make sure that they are not only union members but key union supporters. These are the people who should be your first line when you need to mobilize the members or when you simply want to get the word out. These key people must be the ones who help coordinate the actions and energize others in the workplace.

Union stewards are not Mr. or Ms. Fix-it, not the people who fight the battles for everyone else. They help to inspire the members to address problems and get them resolved. They, therefore, must be very good at listening, but also asking. They need to ask for volunteers, but they also must ask for opinions. They need to listen to what is said by the workers, but also what is not said. And they must be very good at identifying the opinion-makers among the members because those will be the key people who make the difference between having a union that has spunk and energy as opposed to a passive crew that expects their steward to be the knight in shining armor.

— Bill Fletcher, Jr. The writer is the director of field services & education for the American Federation of Government Employees. He is a longtime labor activist who also serves as the immediate past president of TransAfrica Forum and is the co-author of *Solidarity Divided*, which offers an analysis of the crisis in organized labor. He can be reached at fletcher@afge.org.

Common Management Tactics on Grievances

Riddle of the day: How is being a steward like being a hospital nurse, a rocket scientist, a professional athlete, or a police officer?

The answer: Like these other workers, you're part of a special group. And as a member of a special group, the world of stewards, you share common experiences and problems. You and your brother and sister stewards face issues every day that are unique to you as a group.

No matter where you are, no matter who you work for, no matter your age, your race or your sex, stewards encounter common problems and common challenges. Difficult employers are difficult employers, and they can be counted on to act the same way in every workplace, giving stewards everywhere the exact same headaches.

Following are a few typical problems that can be counted on to be pretty much universally found among employers, along with some possible causes and solutions. Maybe you'll find some worthwhile tips here.

Problem 1: Every grievance you raise gets an automatic "NO."

One likely cause for this is that management is just plain used to getting away with it, so why should they do things any differently. Your solution? Don't just accept the rejection, but respond with a request for specific reasons. Unless the reasons convince you that you've got a losing grievance, take it to the next step.

Problem 2: Every grievance is met with a management stall.

As is the case with Problem 1, management may just be used to getting away with it. Your employer may have no clear policy in place on how to respond to the union. So your solution is to keep plugging away and pressing for a settlement. If you don't get a response within proper time limits, take the grievance to the next step.

Problem 3: Management won't settle without a horse trade.

Employers love this kind of "solution" because they know it keeps workers divided and compromises the union. Don't buy into it. Insist that each grievance is settled on its own merits. You can't sacrifice one legitimate grievance just to resolve a second. It's not right, and it's not legal.

Problem 4: Management sends mixed messages.

There could be a couple of things going on here. On the one hand, they may be trying to confuse you enough to just give it up. On the other hand, they may just be disorganized and lacking any clear policy on how to deal with the issue you've raised. You've got to respond by figuring out as best you can just what the cause of the confusion is. Then follow up with the demand that there be a clear channel of communication and command with which the union can deal.

Problem 5: Management rejects your grievances on technicalities.

Once again, a couple of possible solutions present themselves. Maybe you're not preparing your grievances as well as you should be, thus giving the boss the kind of opening he loves. But maybe you're just letting management get away with bogus claims that you're making technical errors, when maybe you aren't. Solutions? Be aware of your rights: check with union officers for clarification of procedures. Avoid getting caught in loopholes. Maybe you can make some technicalities work for the union. And maybe you can apply pressure elsewhere, so that union and member actions are powerful enough that management won't be able to rely on technicality claims to make the issue go away.

Problem 6: Management claims a grievance is no good because there was "an agreement" with the

steward's predecessors.

This could be a bluff or there could be something to it. Ask to see the alleged agreement in writing, signed by authorized representatives. Check with higher-ups in the union to see if management's claim is valid. If it isn't, move ahead with the grievance.

Problem 7: Workers bypass you with their grievances.

Maybe they're going to a chief steward or a local officer because they're not confident of your ability. There may even be a higher-up in the union who encourages this. You have to show members you can represent them effectively. And you have to make them understand the importance of following the established procedure, which is a way to make sure management doesn't pull a fast one by being able to confuse things and create new excuses and diversions. Consult with union officers on ways to establish and enforce your position and authority.

Problem 8: A member complains that the union arbitrates other cases, but not his.

The reason for this complaint is obvious — a worker is upset because the union has determined, for whatever reason, that his or her case is either a loser or — even if it has merit — is not important enough to spend what could be huge amounts of money to pursue. A case in point could be the worker who didn't get paid for an hour of overtime, but it would cost the union treasury — which comes from the pockets of *all* the members — thousands of dollars in legal fees to get that hour's pay. In situations like these the steward has to explain that the union agrees to arbitrate cases based on the merits of each case, and simply cannot afford to take every grievance to the ultimate step.

— Adapted with thanks from the Participant's Manual, Leadership Training for OCAW Stewards (*now USW*).

Stewards Must Grow with the Times

A man who knew something about leadership, President Franklin D. Roosevelt, once said, “If civilization is to survive, we must learn something about the science of human relationships.” Roosevelt could well have been directing his comment at local officers and stewards, who have to look at their personal relations, especially if they’ve just come into office, if they want the union to succeed.

We all have our “work personalities.” In many industries, like manufacturing or the building trades, personality is not always an important part of keeping a job. Assembly line workers can be isolated, so they can be as grumpy as they want without anyone much caring. And trades people are hired for their skills, not for their geniality, so a skilled worker can find employment even with a less-than-pleasant personality.

On the other hand, many workers in the service industries, especially women, are trained rigorously in the customer-is-always-right approach, so they have to appear cheerful and perky even in moments of conflict.

Tune into Voluntary Networks

During workers’ unpaid times, like lunch hour or breaks, we tend to create voluntary networks: we eat with the same people, break with the same people and even go outside to smoke with the same people. Often these work groups are segregated: by race, by sex, by age and seniority, by language or by skill. It’s possible to ignore the workers you don’t like or don’t know as the work day follows a predictable pattern.

Taking on the responsibility of being a union steward means learning all sorts of new skills, and often a personality change is among the first significant changes that must be dealt with. This concern arose in one case — most likely in multiple cases, every day, in fact — when a newly-elected steward toured a

work site and ran into a longtime co-worker who had a question about the union contract. The new steward brushed off the member, mumbling under his breath, “I didn’t like the guy when I worked with him and I’m not going to start now.”

Stewards in service industries, on the other hand, have to re-learn human relations because they will be dealing with bosses who — unlike the customer — are almost never right. The ability to take strong stands and recognize that conflict is part of the territory can require a major personality shift for a steward.

Becoming a steward, obviously, means representing all workers. This may require a careful scrutiny of the steward’s everyday activities.

Stewards must seek out all workers they represent, meeting and greeting longtime co-workers as well as new hires. A smart steward will use break times and meal times to circulate, hanging out with a different group each day to break down the self-segregation (by age, sex, type of job and so forth), listening to problems from all areas of the workplace.

A steward also has to learn new languages — sometimes literal, sometimes figurative — to represent the members. In a workplace with different ethnic groups and languages, a steward obviously has to figure out a way to speak with these workers — through another member who is fluent in the language, perhaps — and to appreciate the customs of these workers. A steward who has to represent workers not part of the steward’s own department has to learn the “lingo” of every area — the work processes and issues, the management personalities and the leadership patterns among the members. Sitting with some of these members at lunch or at a break will help the steward become familiar with these areas.

As workplaces change, stewards must learn new skills and approaches.

And, of course, a steward has to learn the electronic “language” of younger members, overcoming both an age and a digital divide. Stewards can communicate through e-mails, text messages, even set up a department website to reach out to every member.

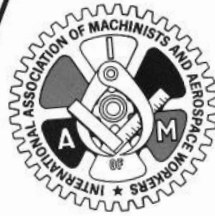
Another area of personality change is recognizing the ongoing need to learn more about the “science” of being a steward. At work, we often do the same things over and over, in a kind of routine. If our employer demands that we learn something different — new servicing technology or new nursing techniques, for example — the initiative comes from above and training is provided, usually on the employer’s time and expense. The initiative to learn new things — new laws, new strategies, new issues — must come from within, or stewards will lag behind.

An occasional steward training workshop is unlikely to keep stewards current, considering that all employers, even in these economically distressed times, spend huge bucks training their labor relations experts. If you doubt this, look at the content — and the prices — for management conferences on “Keeping Your Union Under Control.” As a steward you should proactively look around for union training classes, get a book or video on steward activities and make yourself a better union and member advocate.

Finally, a steward has to recognize that the status quo does not exist, no matter how much he or she might wish otherwise. The union is either growing stronger or it is being pushed back, and the skills and personal relationships of the union steward are essential to controlling the direction.

— Bill Barry. The writer is director of labor studies at the Community College of Baltimore County and author of *I Just Got Elected — Now What?*

**International
Association of
Machinists and
Aerospace Workers**



9000 Machinists Place
Upper Marlboro, Maryland 20772-2687

Area Code 301
967-4500



OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

The new anti-worker majority in the U.S. House of Representatives is wasting no time proposing cuts to programs that help working families. High on their target list are federal workers, high-speed rail projects and Amtrak. Their new spending rules allow cuts to middle-class programs like Medicare and Social Security to count toward deficit reduction, but tax cuts for corporations and the wealthy do not have to be offset by spending reductions.

The GOP budget cuts call for eliminating funding for high-speed rail projects and Amtrak, ending the USDA sugar program, stopping automatic pay increases for federal employees for five years, reducing the federal civilian workforce by 15 percent, repealing the Davis-Bacon Act that protects workers' wages in federally-funded construction projects and defunding any federal employees performing union activities.

Other proposals include rolling back federal spending to 2006 levels and freezing them there for ten years, prohibiting funding of health care reform, barring any further stimulus program spending, ending the Technology Innovation Program and the Manufacturing Extension Partnership, and cutting Medicaid aid to states.

Also high on the anti-worker agenda will be the House Oversight Committee's attempt to roll back the fairer and more democratic voting rules for transportation workers in union elections. These new rules are especially important as the airline industry continues to turn to mergers to survive. At United and Continental, we will go through a series of representation elections for Flight Attendants, Ramp, Stores, Passenger Service and workers in other classifications that could unify almost 55,000 workers under the IAM banner.

A victory at the combined United and Continental would provide some of the greatest bargaining power in the airline industry and benefit thousands of working families. If you want to help in this effort, contact Transportation Coordinator Jay Cronk in the IAM Transportation Department at (301) 967-4558.

Thank you for the work you do.

In Solidarity,

R. Thomas Buffenbarger

R. Thomas Buffenbarger
International President

