

Conflicts Over Workplace Parking



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Iwould've been on time if I hadn't had to drive around the lot for 15 minutes looking for a parking space!"

"The boss is only here twice a week—how come she gets the best parking space?"

"Some jerk took up two parking spaces—so some other jerk let the air out of his tires."

If you work with people who drive, you likely have heard comments like these.

Parking can be a big deal. Parking is usually part of the story of how people get to work. Employers want workers to show up on time, physically and mentally ready to do the job. They want workers to be able to leave when they're finished—and workers want the same thing. Nor do they want stress in the parking lot. But most people depend on their cars to get to work, and the employer has a lot of control over how that daily trip works out.

There are two important things for a steward to remember about parking issues. First, they are bargain-able. There's an established, transparent process for handling them fairly. Second, they can be highly symbolic markers of prestige, status, and convenience, or disrespect and hostility. They are a source of irritation way out of proportion to their importance.

Parking Gets People's Emotions Involved

A steward needs to keep in mind that people have huge emotional heads of steam around parking issues. Most of these focus workers on each other, not on the employer. It's comparable to fighting over what background music gets played: Who has the power to shape my experience of my job? People express disrespect and hostility by parking badly; taking two spots, taking a spot that has by custom become someone else's, or illegitimately taking a handicapped spot. Employers enhance the pecking order aspect of parking by using preferred spots as rewards, reserving close-in parking for customers or, worse,

top management. Parking disputes have a potential for petty corruption, physical face-offs, and occasional property damage. Other kinds of conflict at work get acted out in the parking lot and show up as tardiness or attendance grievances.

Take the Focus Away from Member-on-Member

By shifting the focus away from member to what the union can make the employer do, a steward can defuse some of these emotions. Look at the fundamental issues that unite the workers and develop a strategy that lets people fight for something good for everyone. Addressed like this, parking issues make good collective grievances. If an issue has not been bargained, organize around it to get it into the next contract.

Framing Parking Issues

Some ways to frame parking issues include:

■ **Safety:** Cars may be parked far from the workplace. Is there enough security? How good is the lighting? How clear are the traffic patterns? What happens in extreme weather, when cars get snowed in or flooded? How often are the lots plowed? If someone's battery goes dead late at night, is help readily available?

■ **Equity:** How are parking spaces allotted? The union may want to argue for seniority, which is imperfect but fair. But some people have time-sensitive "third shifts" like child care or elder care. Should they get a parking space with quick access? What about pregnant workers?

■ **Enforcement:** Are workers penalized for parking in the wrong space or area,

or for lacking a permit? Are cars towed or ticketed? Are handicapped spaces reserved and monitored? Look for disparate treatment here, because employers tend to enforce parking sporadically and treat management differently.

■ **Distant Lots:** Some lots are so huge the employer provides a shuttle service. Are workers on the clock while waiting for the shuttle? How often does the shuttle come? Is time on the shuttle comparable to setup time or clean-up time?

■ **Permits:** Some employers require workers to buy parking permits. How often must permits be renewed, how much do they cost, how inconvenient are they to get, and what are the penalties for not having one? Do casual workers have the same requirements for permits? How is the revenue from permits being spent?

■ **Parking versus Transit:** If employees with cars get free parking, do people who take public transit get nothing? Do they get free or subsidized transit passes? Is there employer support for carpooling? How about people who walk or ride bikes? If there is employer-provided secure car parking, shouldn't there be secure bike parking?

Negotiating for Public Transit

Employers have an interest in shifting travel patterns from private cars to public transit. Big employers have a lot of local clout. They can get a bus stop, a bike lane or a separate exit off the freeway. This can be a win-win issue for both union and employer. After all, the cost of a parking lot can be thousands of dollars a year for surfacing, painting, managing runoff and snow, lighting, policing and insuring "free" parking spaces. There are also opportunity costs: All that space could be used for something else.

A final thought: If bargaining is tough, or if you want to push against a very bad grievance related to parking, don't overlook direct action. There are lots of things that you can do with cars. Think about it.

—Joe Berry and Helena Worthen. The writers are veteran labor educators



Dealing with Difficult Bosses

Union stewards have to deal with all sorts of management representatives, people with a wide range of styles and approaches to their jobs and the ways they deal with the union. Check out some of the more exotic of these birds, as described in this article, and see how veteran stewards recommend handling them—and the lessons they’ve learned along the way. As you read, though, keep in mind that no two people are exactly alike and that these suggestions won’t work in every situation. Ultimately, a steward’s unique situation and workplace, combined with the school of hard knocks, will allow him or her to figure out how to deal with difficult supervisors

Friendly but Unresponsive

This type almost always says that she’ll follow through on your requests (such as an information request or a proposal to transfer an employee away from an abusive supervisor, for example). But somehow there is always a holdup. Maybe she puts the blame on upper management or says that it is harder than she thought to deliver what you want. Either way, if the request is not honoured in a reasonable time (and/or in accordance with your contract), move to the next step. That might be a grievance, an unfair labour practice or a meeting with higher-ups in management. Be sure to get everything in writing. This type cannot be depended on.

The Intimidator

This person likes to shout or try to make you feel as if you don’t know what you’re doing—or both. You should stay calm and deal with him professionally, in a matter-of-fact way. If this doesn’t work, particularly in a bargaining situation, the union team may want to walk out, letting the management side know that you will return when they can control their problem child. You can also consider exposing the obnoxious manager in a leaflet or newsletter. (“Who’s afraid of the big, bad

manager? Not this union!” or “Meet Mr. Personality.”) If you really feel that he has greater knowledge than you, putting you at a disadvantage, ask your local leadership for guidance or assistance. Remember that this manager is just a blowhard; you are part of a strong organization.

In-Your-Face Anti-Union

This management rep doesn’t hide the fact that she doesn’t like unions. In fact, she tells you just that, and lets you know that she isn’t going to do anything to help the union. In some ways, this person is easier to deal with than some other types because there is no question where she stands. Go by the book with her. Be careful to put everything in writing, don’t miss deadlines and keep your membership informed and involved. If she is being obstinate in resolving a legitimate grievance, consider doing this: Make sure that you are meeting with her one day during the lunch break or after work. Organize a large group of union members to come into the room and surround the table. Make the point that the members are not happy with management’s behaviour and are involved and ready to act.

Labour Relations Jock

This management type is very competitive and sees labour relations as a game of one-on-one basketball. After a particularly gruelling meeting he might approach you and say, “Good session” (as in “Good game”). He has a big ego, and frequently tries to try to impress you with his knowledge of precedents and the union contract, when half the time the “facts” he cites do not actually support management’s position. Many stewards deal with him by asking him to point out specific cases and contract language that support his argument. Because this type wants to impress you with his research skills, he may actually give them to you (of course, you should ask for your local leadership’s

help in doing your own research, where necessary). Do not let him intimidate you with his supposed knowledge. Be prepared when dealing with him and remember that labour relations are not a one-on-one game—it’s a team sport. Involve your team by keeping your local leadership up to date and your members informed and active. Union power comes from a united and involved membership.

The Liar

This person makes promises to the union that she breaks. One steward tells of a manager who said on a Friday afternoon that she was going to move one worker to a new work station, but the steward discovered on Monday that she had moved *three* workers over the weekend, without bargaining. It is important to expose such lies to the membership and even to others in management. If it is a bargaining issue, point out her lies during negotiations. If the lie is a violation of your contract or the law, consider filing a grievance or discuss with your local leadership the possibility of filing an unfair labour practice. Also, confirm in writing all of your discussions with the Liar to minimize her lying, or for evidence in grievances, unfair labour practices, and the like.

The Fair Player

You will deal with many difficult types of bosses in your career as a union steward. However, you may run across a supervisor who is fair and reasonable, who actually wants to do the right thing. Help him or her develop arguments that can be used with upper management. Let this supervisor have small symbolic victories to strengthen his or her position with management, as long as these victories don’t hurt the membership. But be careful to remember that this person is working for your employer, and do not let your relationship make *you* forget for whom you are working.



Ultimately, whatever type of boss you are dealing with, remember these basics: Always be prepared, adhere to deadlines, and know your contract. And most of all, keep your membership informed and involved.

—Carl Goldman. The writer is executive director of AFSCME Council 26, Washington, D.C.

Helping Troubled Co-Workers

While most steward duties involve the routine of making sure the union contract is honoured, it's not unusual to find yourself serving in the role of Dear Abby, trying to help co-workers deal with personal problems that find their way onto the job.

The challenge is, how do you help people with personal issues, without being seen as a busybody? The answer is that while you may not be a trained social worker, you can still play an important role by referring troubled co-workers to the Employee Assistance Program (EAP), or it's equivalent, available through most union contracts.

What do you say to a co-worker who seems headed for trouble? How do you make a referral without being seen as judgmental or intrusive? When should you push the issue? When should you back off?

Three common scenarios outlined below may give you a sense of possible approaches. First, though, be sure you're aware of the services offered by the EAP. If there is no EAP, look for services available in your community that might be of help. When making a referral, have a brochure to give to the troubled co-worker.

EAPs are comprehensive programs offered free of charge as a benefit to employees. Generally, they provide 24-hour crisis intervention, assessment, short-term counselling, and referrals to helpful resources within the community. Problems addressed usually include substance abuse, mental health concerns, workplace stress, financial difficulties, family and relationship problems, marital difficulties, physical illness, loss, trauma, and a host of other life stressors. EAPs also address workplace concerns created because of the problems of another person, such as a boss's drinking problem, a co-worker's chronic lateness, a spouse's illness, or a child's academic troubles. Services are usually offered to family members as well as to the employee and are confidential. Most EAPs offer counselling off site, so employees feel more comfortable using them without being "spotted."

If you become aware of a troubled employee: let go of fears you may have about being seen as a busybody. Most people in pain welcome the inquiries of a concerned person.

1. A Cautious but Willing Worker

"Hey, Johnny," you say. "You got a second?" (Johnny says yes.) "I'm worried about you, friend. I hear you and Maggie broke up and that your dad passed away. You're not doing well. I hear you showed up the other day with a major hangover, and you put other people in danger. You're not a drinker, Johnny." (Johnny is silent). "OK, look, you don't have to talk to me, but I want you to know there are places to go to get help." Give him the brochure. He takes it and puts it in his pocket. "They're good at the EAP. You can go there and talk to somebody, and they'll help you cope with what's going on. It's free. It's private. Give them a call, OK?"

Later, you check on him, and Johnny tells you he saw a counsellor and he thinks it will help. He thanks you. With everything going bad in his life, he doesn't want to get into job trouble too.

But what if the co-worker is more resistant? In that case, be prepared to push a little bit.

2. The Resistant Worker

"Hey, Wanda, You got a second?" She says she's busy. You know that she's in trouble, so you don't want to be put off. "OK, so if now is not a good time, when would be?" Wanda challenges you about why you want to talk. You tell her: "As your steward, I want to talk with you about your being in trouble with the boss. Remember, I'm on your side." She finally agrees to talk to you.

You come with the EAP brochure in hand, prepared to name the troubling behaviour. "People say you're spending hours on the phone, fighting with your husband. It's affecting not just you but all the people who work around you. Some

complaints have been filed. The supervisor is going to come down on you, if he hasn't already." Wanda starts to respond, angrily. Interrupting her, you say, "Look. I'm a steward, not a family counsellor. But did you know that the EAP can help you out? They do have family counsellors there, and it's free. You need to get some professional guidance here, Wanda. Here's the brochure. It's the smart thing to do. Or do you want to let that jerk of a husband control your life, and make you lose your job? Then what would you have?" She's mad, but she takes the brochure and says she'll go. Score one for you.

But be willing to accept that despite your best efforts, not everyone is going to take your advice. In these cases, humility is a good quality to have.

3. A Need to Hit Bottom

"Hey Fred, you got a sec?" You tell him you saw him get drunk at the company picnic, and that would be OK, except that he's showing up later and later for work, he's usually got a hangover and you're concerned that he's putting not only himself but others in a dangerous situation. He's already had two warnings from the boss and one accident the boss doesn't even know about.

Fred tells you to butt out of his business. You say, as his steward, you feel you owe it to him to let him know that the EAP offers counselling to people with problems. You give him the brochure and tell him help is available. He throws the brochure on the floor and stomps off, and you find out a month later that his supervisor threatened to fire him unless he attends an alcohol treatment program. He agreed to go but then didn't show up, and was fired.

You hope that Fred has found his "bottom" and will get into a recovery program, but you are humble enough to know that it's his life on the line, not yours.



To sum up, with a combination of knowledge, compassion, chutzpah, and humility, you have the tools to make a good referral to your workplace EAP, improving the odds that your co-workers will actually get the needed help.

—Margery Silvertown, LCSW. The writer is a Maryland counselor specializing in personal and relationship problem-solving.

Protecting Your Co-Workers from Ergonomic Injuries

A lot of workplace issues you have to identify and deal with as a steward are no-brainers—think about a supervisor firing an entire crew because one person screwed up—but a lot are harder to spot, and to fix. A prime example in many workplaces is the possibility your co-workers are in danger of developing some serious physical problems—and they don't even know it.

The next time you're walking around your workplace, pay particular attention to what kinds of motions are involved with the various jobs your co-workers do. Some tasks involve a lot of reaching, bending, or turning; others may require simple movements that are repeated over and over and over again, day after day.

When workers have to perform the same movements repeatedly, they may experience repetitive strain injuries. These problems can be hard to spot, but the risks they pose make awareness of them one of a steward's most important jobs.

To diagnose or prevent musculoskeletal injury, begin by observing ergonomic risk factors. Ergonomics refers to fitting the job to the person, rather than the person to the job. A common cause of repetitive strain injuries, including most back disorders, is that muscle tissue is not given an opportunity to rest and repair itself. This can be aggravated by the slower rate of healing typical as we age. It is important to spot and report injuries at their earliest stages so that risk factors can be evaluated and modified or eliminated.

Common symptoms of repetitive strain include pain, discomfort, redness and swelling, limited range of motion, stiffness in joints, weakness and clumsiness, numbing/tingling sensations ("pins and needles"), popping and cracking noises in the joints, and "burning" sensations in muscles. As these injuries develop, the symptoms of pain and/or weakness are first felt at work and then disappear during off-hours or rest. The good news is that, usually, the problem

is reversible at this stage. But if working conditions are not changed, the injury can worsen to the point that symptoms no longer disappear between work shifts and may begin to interfere with a person's ability to perform usual work activities.

If the trauma is allowed to continue, the pain is likely to persist even at rest. Severe pain, limited mobility, loss of sensation or muscle weakness can make it

impossible to perform most tasks—not just at work, but at home as well.

A great number of jobs can be adjusted to be a better fit for the person. Often the best ideas come from the workers themselves as they recognize risk factors and propose solutions. Below are some general risk factors that reflect the body's limitations, along with several suggested solutions.

RISK FACTORS — AND SOLUTIONS

Joints are bent rather than neutral or relaxed (any joints including the back). Sometimes tasks involve joints bent as far as they can go – the surrounding muscles are stretched and weaker, easier to injure.

■ *Alternate standing and sitting; move around and change position to use different muscles. Use ergonomically designed tools, which put the bend in the tool (rather than bent joints in the user).*

Work or load is too far out in front of the body. This places considerable strain on the lower back especially.

■ *For any lifting job, bring the load as close to the body as possible. Keep lifts between shoulder and knee height. Get instruction on proper lifting techniques. If a load cannot be brought close to the body, buddy-lift or use a machine to perform the lift.*

Body bent forward – this means that much of the body weight is being suspended from the lower back; the surrounding muscles are stretched and weaker, easier to injure.

■ *Lift using a squat position rather than a bent back. Buddy-lift or use a machine to perform the lift.*

Twisted trunk. Twisting the back strains muscles, tendons, and discs; lifting and twisting is worse.

■ *Avoid any twisting. If lifting and carrying an object, lift while facing forward and then take steps to make the turn.*

Sudden movements and forces. Never swing things, especially as a way to lift heavier weight; the muscles can be forced to stretch faster than they are able to respond, producing over-stretching or tearing and injury.

■ *Avoid swinging motions. If an item is too heavy to lift alone, get help or use a machine.*

Posture or movement maintained for a long period of time. Beware of prolonged contact stress such as pressing or leaning the body, hands, or wrists against a hard or sharp edge like the edge of a table.

■ *Plan for breaks and recovery/rest periods.*

■ *Divide the job among several people, so no one person does it for very long. Put padding on sharp edges.*

Continuous stress on certain muscles producing localized muscle fatigue. Sometimes a job overworks just a few muscles, such as using the hands and bending the wrists over and over again.

■ *Change position frequently, alternating sitting and standing, or take breaks to reduce fatigue. Modern heavy equipment tends to have controls that produce better positions for the arms, wrists, and shoulders.*

Working to the point of exhaustion. As muscles become exhausted, injury is more likely. When workers become exhausted yet must continue working, they will simply get it done any way they can: this further increases the risk of injury.

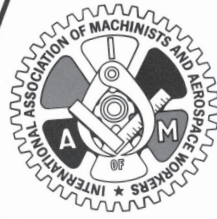
■ *Plan for recovery/rest periods. Frequent short rests reduce cumulative fatigue better than a few long breaks.*

■ *Divide tasks among several people; varying the tasks promotes the use of different postures and muscles.*

Vibration. Using vibrating tools or machine controls, or sitting on vibrating equipment.

■ *Padded or gel-filled gloves for vibrating tools or machine controls; good seat cushions and proper seat shape to protect the lower back. Plan for breaks and recovery/rest periods to vary the posture and muscles used.*

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OFFICE OF THE INTERNATIONAL PRESIDENT

Dear IAM Shop Steward,

In the United States, the 2014 midterm elections are just around the corner. We have a big task ahead to retain a worker-friendly majority in the United States Senate. If the Senate changes hands, there will be little to stop the steady stream of anti-labor legislation now being passed by the House of Representatives.

An anti-labor majority in the Senate would mean more job losses from sequestration, national right-to-work legislation, escalation of the war on federal workers, less investment in our nation's infrastructure and millions of unemployed workers left with no hope or help. And an anti-labor Congress in the U.S. would cause a ripple effect and hurt our brothers and sisters in Canada.

As a Steward, you can play an important role by starting now to make sure your union brothers and sisters are registered to vote. As we approach election day, do everything you can to educate your members about the real issues that will affect their jobs and families. Then, remind everyone to vote either by early voting, absentee ballot, or showing up at the polls on November 4, 2014.

There are 36 seats up for election this year in the Senate. Worker-friendly Democrats are defending 21 of those seats, and seven of those races are in Republican-leaning states where Mitt Romney carried the vote in 2012. Republicans need a net gain of just six seats to take control of the Senate.

Many pundits are giving Republican candidates an edge because of low voter turnout, but low turnout also gives labor voters a greater impact, especially in states such as Kentucky and Georgia where pro-labor candidates have a chance to win GOP-held seats.

We can also help Democratic incumbents stay in office in the close-race states of Louisiana, North Carolina, Alaska, Colorado, New Hampshire, Virginia, Arkansas, and Montana, and make sure open-race seats in West Virginia, South Dakota, Michigan and Iowa remain in friendly hands.

We have a lot of work to do between now and November. But with your help and a good get-out-the-vote effort, we can make a difference and win for working families.

In Solidarity,

R. Thomas Buffenbarger

R. Thomas Buffenbarger
International President

