



PRODUCTIVE

POLITICAL

DISCUSSIONS



**BUILDING
UNION
SOLIDARITY
IN AN ELECTION
YEAR**

KONO PAKI
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Polls show that most union members understand and support their union's political activity. But, talking to members about politics can be tricky. Many people are justifiably cynical, seeing politics as a dirty business. The following guidelines will help stewards relay information and build participation without worsening divisions or agitating members who do not agree with the union's political positions or endorsed candidates.

Why Politics?

One reason unions are so involved in electoral politics and campaigns for specific legislation is that what is won at the bargaining table can be taken away by government action. It's an arena in which unions and their allies can win advances not only for members, but for all workers: safety and health protections, retirement provisions, wage and hour laws and more.

Inform Yourself about the Issues and the Process

Unions do polling and have committees that analyze issues and candidates. Usually, elected boards decide which positions and candidates the union will support. Information about the union's process and reasons for their endorsements (or lack of endorsement) are usually found on your union's website, at your union's political education committee meeting or by talking with a union official or staff person. Ask questions until you are sure you understand the process and the reasons well enough to explain them to others.

Provide Information, Not Directives

No one likes being *told* how they should vote or what to support. They do appreciate information that helps them make up their own mind.

Don't Say: "Here's how the union wants us to vote."

Do Say: "Here is a fact sheet from the union on the upcoming election (or issue before the legislature). Please take a look – I'm around to talk about it if you'd like."

And, if a member has a question you don't know the answer to, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know. I'll find out."

Productive Political Discussions

Respect Opposing Views

Everyone has the right to disagree with the union and support what is important to them. You should defend that right and convey to everyone in your workplace that no one should be hassled for not agreeing with the union's recommendations. It is important that everyone participate in the union.

Gently Determine People's Positions

Do not assume you know where others stand on political or legislative issues. After you provide information on the union's position, politely ask members, "What do you think?" Once they respond, use the Rule of Thirds to determine how to proceed.

This informal rule of human behavior says most groups have three subgroups:

1. Those who agree with you
2. Those who disagree with you
3. Those who are undecided

Members of each subgroup should be approached differently:

To those who agree, say something like: "That's great, here is a list of ways you can show your support. Which things can you help with?" Don't assume everyone is eligible to vote – but all supporters can participate by knocking on doors, phone banking and the like.

To those who disagree, especially those who feel very strongly, politely reply: "I understand. Of course that's your right and I respect that. Thanks."

To those who are undecided, you might say: "What is most important to you in making a decision? Here's information about that. If you have other questions I'll try to answer now or get back to you soon."

Keep Track of Each Sub-Group

Keeping track allows you to call on supporters to join you in talking to the undecideds and avoid arguments with those who strongly disagree.

Avoid Arguing

Don't waste time arguing or trying to convince those who disagree—it rarely changes anyone's mind and it can generate tension and divisions. Concentrate on getting supporters involved and bringing those who are undecided to your side.

Stick to Issues, Reasons and Shared Values—Not Labels

Avoid labeling politicians as liars and jerks and making blanket statements. Concentrate on information about the candidates or issues. Invite others to support the union's position because it makes sense and is in keeping with your shared union values—not based on a party's political philosophy.

Do say: "Here are the reasons why we support this candidate/issue."

Don't say: "Support this candidate because she/he is a liberal/conservative."

Pay Attention to Your Tone

Sometimes when we feel strongly about something we unintentionally come off in ways that put people off, especially when there is much at stake. Don't talk down to people or act like your position is the only legitimate one; don't scold, push too hard or otherwise offend.

Acknowledge Cynicism

Say something like, "Politics can be nasty and politicians don't always keep their promises, but if we don't support our allies in the legislature things could get worse." Then steer the discussion to issues that affect working people and show how the union's recommended action addresses those issues.

End on a Positive Note

Regardless of where others stand, always thank them for their time and end the conversation on a friendly, positive note.

—Ken Margolies. The writer recently retired from the Worker Institute, Cornell ILR.

When you think of health and safety hazards at work, “violence” might not come to mind. Violence at work—defined as assault, abuse, threats and harassment—can be traumatic for all involved (see Overmyer article on next page). As a union steward, you may be able to influence how management minimizes everyone’s risk. (Under the “general duty” provision of occupational health and safety law in the U.S. and Canada, it’s management’s responsibility.)

The U.S. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH) notes that these factors increase the risk for workplace violence:

- Interacting with the public
- Exchanging money
- Delivering services or goods
- Working alone, late at night or early in the morning
- Guarding valuables or property
- Dealing with violent people or volatile situations.

An evaluation of your workplace’s violence prevention program should first ensure that “violence” is defined in a way that includes both actual and threatened attacks, including verbal ones. Then, using recommended elements from either the U.S. or Canadian Occupational Safety and Health guidelines, learn about the risk factors for your workplace and conduct a hazard assessment.

Three things to consider:

Can someone easily enter buildings or reach private (rather than public) areas? Are entrances/exits and parking areas well lit? Are there barriers where employees handle money? Are potential weapons such as scissors and letter-openers accessible to visitors?

Survey the reported and unreported incidents, as well as workers’ concerns about risks on site and in the field. You might be surprised at what you learn, as your members may have thought risk was just “part of the job” or that reporting concerns would make them sound weak.

Examine workplace records for patterns or trends. Check workers’ compensation, police and insurance reports. Watch for injuries resulting from violence and

Guarding Against Workplace Violence

also health problems (such as high blood pressure) from stressful situations.

Your workplace’s prevention strategy should safeguard against different kinds of perpetrators, those external as well as internal to the workplace, including:

■ **Criminals:** strangers whose sole purpose in the workplace is to commit a crime. Most workplace homicides occur during acts such as robberies.

■ **Customers, clients, patients:** someone with a legitimate relationship to the workplace, but who becomes violent during an interpersonal transaction.

■ **Co-workers:** Only about nine percent of violent acts are committed by co-workers, supervisors or former workers.

■ **Personal relationships:** Violence can occur on the job because a perpetrator found the victim at work. The most common scenario is domestic violence.

■ **Animals:** Workers who visit properties to make repairs, read utility meters, or serve house-bound patients may be confronted by aggressive animals. Consider a policy of requiring that pets be shut in a separate area; if this is not done, re-schedule the work.

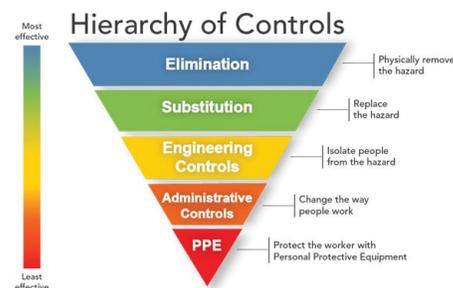
With these risk factors in mind, what can be done to address them? You can apply the hierarchy of controls. Here are some examples, from most to least effective:

■ **Remove the threat** (most effective): move meters to the outside of buildings so workers don’t have to go inside

■ **Engineering controls:** lighting and visibility, especially at doors and in parking areas; video monitoring; barriers; lockable bathrooms for staff; controlled access; alarms on doors; panic buttons in offices

■ **Administrative controls:** training to recognize warning signs and defusing confrontation

■ **Practices and policies:** eliminate long wait times; provide escorts to one’s car



Source: National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH)

■ **Personal protective equipment** (least effective): unfortunately, for most jobs, there’s not a lot to be done at this level, but perhaps personal alarms, clothing with identifiers or ID badges

Be sure your members know how to complete incident reports for physical assaults, verbal threats or harassment. Then, be sure the employer investigates each incident, corrects the problem and reports back to you.

An important consideration in a workplace violence program is protection from retaliation against a worker for making a good faith complaint. Retaliation in this case is discrimination against someone who makes a charge of workplace violence or participates in an investigation about violence. Anyone who engages in retaliation should face discipline up to termination.

Unfortunately, even with the best efforts for prevention and response, the unpredictable can still happen. Your workplace program should include a plan to help people (and the organization) recover from an incident. Understanding how the stress caused by workplace violence can affect your members can help you to help them process their reactions, recover faster, stay healthier and have less disruption in their work and personal lives.

Both the Canadian Labour Program and OSHA have informative webpages.

—Nellie J. Brown, MS, CIH. The writer is director of the Workplace Health and Safety Program at the Worker Institute, Cornell ILLR.

Return-to-Work Strategies: Assisting Members after a Trauma

Suppose a member you represent has been absent after experiencing a traumatic life event—surviving the death of a close family member, a violent crime, a debilitating accident or a significant illness or surgery. You’ve just learned they have a date to return to work. As their union steward, you naturally feel compelled to help all parties involved with the transition period but you are not sure how to go about it.

Unfortunately, society in general does little to help us cope with an extreme life event; the workplace can be even more challenging. Consequently, a worker who isn’t allowed to attend to the healing process can have a very difficult transition back to work because what used to be “normal” just isn’t anymore. This can affect not only their ability to do their job, but may also affect those who work with and around them. Here are some tips to help you turn your responsibilities and concerns into positive union action.

It’s All About Support

Research confirms the importance of fostering a work environment where the individual who experienced the life-altering event is fully supported by all co-workers through transparency, open communication and accommodation. The union steward has a crucial role to play in these scenarios—your support for a member during the recovery process can make a real difference in her or his ability to find appropriate coping mechanisms to get through each day and, eventually, thrive.

Some returning members may be almost reclusive, others may want to talk about their situation. Be sensitive to their needs and provide a caring, nonjudgmental ear. Granted, the workplace cannot become a counseling center and stewards should not take on the role of professional counselor. However, listening with compassion – if asked – and avoiding the

temptation to offer unsolicited advice can be the best gifts you can give. Your physical presence and commitment to listening without judgment are critical to your member’s recovery and healing process.

In many workplaces, labor has worked with management to offer a confidential Employee Assistance Program (EAP). EAPs make counseling and rehabilitative resources available and can be extremely effective in assisting traumatized workers; they are almost always free of charge. Both you and the returning worker may benefit from a professional’s expertise. Depending on the nature of the trauma your member experienced, you may also want to reach out to other health care or service providers for guidance.

Communicate with Others

Union stewards must face related issues head-on. The returning member’s situation is likely to come up in conversation among co-workers. Don’t hesitate to acknowledge the topic honestly and let others know that it is okay to respectfully refer to the occurrence. Suggest that co-workers gently welcome the individual back and take their cues from the returning member’s demeanor. If you become aware of inappropriate comments on the part of a co-worker or supervisor, do not engage them in the presence of the worker but consider taking them aside to discuss how they might be more respectful.

Many authorities agree that it is best for an employee recovering from trauma to get back to daily routines in the shortest time possible—as long as they also receive meaningful support services. As a union steward, you should be proactive and update management and co-workers about accommodations the returning member may need. For some, a private space they can easily access when they are overwhelmed or overcome by emotions

may suffice. For others, release time to attend support meetings can be a great help. It is important for you to familiarize yourself with applicable federal and state or provincial employment laws as well as your collective bargaining agreement so you can be a resource and, if necessary, an advocate for the returning member. This will provide all parties the chance to collectively identify any policies, procedures and activity adjustments that might help the worker resume regular duties. Such discussions will also give you a framework from which you can start educating co-workers about the challenges that may lie ahead.

When representing a member returning to work, you can request specific meetings with management to evaluate the transition period and make necessary accommodations. Most workers are entitled to reasonable accommodations as long as they can still perform their job duties. In many workplaces, in both the public and private sector, flexible work arrangements and technology have increased the options for workers to do their jobs.

The Role of Work

Proactive, supportive measures can allow the individual to preserve their dignity as a worker while at the same time enabling a return to productive employment. In many instances, the ability to return to work after a life-altering event plays an important role in the individual’s recovery and healing process.

In sum, honest communication, flexibility, understanding and a good support network are often the most important characteristics you can display while managing a fellow union member’s return to work after a trauma. Helping them find the right formula to the work-and-life equation will ease the transition to their new normal.

—Ove Overmyer. The writer is communications director for the Civil Service Employees Association of Western New York.

I Just Became a Steward— Now What?

As a new steward, you deserve both congratulations and thanks. Achieving this position means that you're trusted to represent the union and its values. The learning curve for new union stewards is steep, but don't be overwhelmed by what you don't yet know—*every* steward was once a rookie! Time, training and mentoring will bring you up to speed.

The usual activity for training new stewards is to have them attend classes in person and online to learn good stewarding. While these classes are helpful, there is no substitute for on-the-job experience. In order for new stewards to get *actual* experience, local officers might set up an apprentice-like program to supplement classroom training, bringing in veteran stewards to assist. These programs can offer hands-on practice.

In addition to those resources, here are some ideas for how to develop knowledge and skills a new steward needs:

- Does it sound insulting to suggest that you **read the contract**, carefully, from cover to cover? Most of us, as members, never did—we looked at the sections about wages, and maybe on job posting, but otherwise paid little attention. As a steward you need to know—and understand—every clause in your agreement. As you read through it, ask more experienced stewards or your local officers to explain any sections you don't understand. Some parts may be written in “lawyeresque,” which *no* one can understand. Translating those clauses into everyday language—for yourself, for your co-workers, and perhaps even in your next negotiations—can be a big help.

- Pay particular attention to the grievance procedure and **learn the time limits** for filing. One of the worst experiences for a new steward is filing a solid grievance after the time limit has expired and seeing it automatically disqualified. This is a

harsh way to lose the confidence of your members and—in an open-shop situation—maybe even lose them as members.

- It is helpful to get some practice before you actually have to file a grievance on your own. Few union members have actually seen a full grievance form, with the union's charge and management's response. Before you fill out your first, **look over a number of grievance forms** from the recent past and evaluate how those filings match—or don't—what you learned in your steward training class.

- As part of your union's training program, there are ideally opportunities for new stewards to **handle grievances for noncritical situations**. Fill out a fact sheet, get whatever documentation you need from the union records or from management, interview potential witnesses and write up the grievance. Then ask an experienced steward to look over your work before you file it.

- **Interview an experienced steward**. If you have one in your department, great! Find her, look over her grievance, and pester her with questions. How did she investigate? Why did she pick certain witnesses or documentation? Ask her to walk you through her process so you can learn from a pro.

- Recognize that your importance as a steward is not just about filing grievances. You are the face of the union in your area so adjust your daily routine to **be in contact with as many members as possible**. Make a conscious effort to talk with your co-workers by sitting at a different table in the lunch room or hanging out with a new group during breaks.

- It is crucial to recognize that, as a steward, you now **represent all of the members in your area**, not just your

friends or the co-workers you like. You must deal fairly with even those co-workers you don't like. After all, you are the front line for the union in defending a contract that covers everyone, so you have to treat even unpleasant co-workers with respect. One veteran steward said, “I look every member straight in the eye as if they're a member of my family, even if I

don't like them or think they don't have a grievance. I tell all new stewards to do the same thing.”

- It is also important to **treat all other stewards with respect**, even though you may not like them or their representation of the members. One of the worst situations for a union is a

quarrel—in front of the boss—between two stewards. Resolve any differences *before* you meet with management and, if you do have an internal dispute, keep it inside the family.

- **Go to a grievance meeting**, even if you don't have a grievance or are not yet officially a steward. This will give you a sense of what to expect when *you* are the one presenting a case. What are the personnel people like? How do they attack a grievance? With documentation? With witnesses? How are the meetings run? Sitting through a couple of sessions will demystify the process and prepare you to do the best job for the union.

Being a steward is both an honor and a responsibility. Following some of the advice above can build your confidence in your abilities and ease you into becoming an effective, and well-respected, union representative.

—Bill Barry. The writer is the retired director of labor studies at the Community College of Baltimore County. Special thanks to the officers and stewards of ATU Local 1197 in Jacksonville, Florida and ATU Local 1579 in Gainesville, Florida.

Resolve any differences before you meet with management.

OPEIU Steward Update is a bi-monthly newsletter for the information and education of OPEIU's dedicated stewards.

OPEIU Scholarships Will Help Pay Student Debt

The statistics are staggering. Approximately 43 million Americans owe more than \$1.3 trillion in student loans. To put it in better perspective, the average 2016 college graduate is entering the job market with \$37,172 in student loan debt.

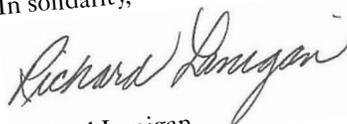
To help members who are saddled with student debt, OPEIU is announcing a restructuring of the OPEIU scholarship program to include scholarships designated solely for the repayment of student debt. OPEIU is making a top priority the issues that affect our younger members. Additional information about these scholarships will be available to local unions and stewards soon.

Your Members May Be Eligible for Student Debt Forgiveness

Do you have members who work in the public sector? If so, let them know they may be eligible for a federal student debt forgiveness program. Through a government program called Public Service Loan Forgiveness, all of their direct federal student loans could be forgiven, tax-free.

To qualify, you must have 10 years of qualifying on-time payments toward your debt and be working in public service at least 30 hours a week beginning after Oct. 1, 2007. Visit forgivemystudentdebt.org for more information and eligibility requirements.

In solidarity,



Richard Lanigan
President



AFL-CIO, CLC

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