Being a Steward in Tough Times

The economic collapse across North America presents a lot of stewards with a challenging responsibility: helping union members protect themselves in turbulent times. In the process, members can be shown that their union, and their union contract, is such an important protection. That way a steward can actually try to build unionism — even when the going is rough.

When layoff rumors start to circulate, the first thing you as a steward should do every morning is drink an extra glass of tenacity: the gloom and doom that permeate a workplace as layoffs are negotiated will push every workers’ morale — including yours — to record lows. A steward has to recognize the financial and emotional strains among the members and try to keep everything as positive as possible.

A steward should initially challenge any discussion by the boss about layoffs, demanding to see proof, such as loss of orders or other work or revenues, before accepting any reduction in force. In normal grievances, a steward never simply accepts the employer’s versions of the “facts.” Employ the same skepticism when layoffs are first discussed.

A Test of Skills

The layoff, if it finally happens, then becomes a test of a steward’s skills, because there are now two areas of concern: the first is within the workplace, with the wide range of contract issues. The second is for the members who are pushed out of their jobs and scattered around the landscape. A member is still a “member,” even when on layoff, and may need the help and support of a steward and union even more.

Here’s a checklist for some of the areas of steward activity inside the workplace:

1. Know your contract, every clause of it, so that the rights of every member are protected. If there is bumping language in the contract, the steward has to be knowledgeable about all the complicated procedures. You want to make sure that employer “pigs” are not somehow protected beyond the contract. If there are challenges from members about the bumping procedures, a steward must deal tactfully — these are, after all, conflicts among members, each of whom is desperately trying to hang on to a job. Be fair, be reasonable, and set aside your personal friendships by simply demanding that everyone live by the terms of the union contract.

2. It is also important to appreciate the super-seniority provisions in some union contracts, negotiated to protect a steward in case of a layoff so that there will be experienced union representation on site to help the survivors in a difficult time. Members who are being laid off suddenly discover that a steward, with lesser seniority, is staying on the job and may become zealous defenders of strict seniority. Hold your ground that the contract cannot be changed and that there are good reasons for protecting the union structure.

3. If there is a layoff, it is crucial for a steward to make certain that all the contract protections are enforced. Many contracts allow continuation of employer health insurance. If the employer doesn’t continue to pay for coverage, COBRA allows workers in the U.S. to keep it in place for another 18 months if they can pay out of their own pocket. How about accrued vacations or holidays? Make sure that the boss settles up in full before your member goes out the door.

4. If workers are being laid off, a steward must beware the Monty Hall syndrome, from the old television show — let’s make a deal! The boss will often ask a steward to relax enforcement of some contract articles: “Don’t be so tough on us when times are bad.” You may even see the union itself being blamed for the layoffs. You can see this play out in the discussions about the problems of the major auto companies. Anti-union politicians — and even some others who should know better — step up to blame various provisions in the United Auto Workers contract for the companies’ financial problems. The battle for the hearts and minds of your members and their communities is one that a steward needs to take part in.

5. A steward should be continuously vigilant when the boss tries to cut corners. Most union contracts, for example, have language to prevent sub-contracting if it results in the loss of bargaining unit work. But mere words are a small obstacle when money is involved. This is a great time to implement your “thousand eyes” strategy: after explaining to your members the contract language on subcontracting, they must be constantly looking around for new faces, and be ready to report back if they see something. Not only does this campaign help protect your work but it also builds an internal organizing program that every member should be eager to join.

6. And of course a good steward keeps up the pressure on the employer to recall workers, even if just a few at a time. It is easy for a shrewd employer to shift work around so that fewer workers are putting out the same production. Don’t let this happen or the workers on layoff will never come back. In one of the most controversial areas, the steward has to work with the local union officers to block any overtime assignments — remember that every hour of overtime is one hour less for a potential recall. If a workplace regularly had overtime, solidarity would be severely tested, but there may be contract language to help you out. Otherwise, it’s a fight worth having: the return to work of even a few co-workers means restoration of their benefits.

The economic crisis will be a major test for every union and every steward, but unionism has survived tough times before and a steward must offer leadership to show that the tougher the times, the greater the need to pull together.

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