

The Disgruntled Steward

My members are so-o-o-o dumb! I just can't believe it. They don't know what's in the contract. They let the boss get away with everything. They don't want to do anything. I just about give up on 'em — the whole bunch."

As a steward, did you ever say this? Unfortunately, as workers and workplaces change, it's becoming more common for a steward to become frustrated and angry — not just at the boss but at the members as well.

Look in the Mirror

A good steward sees the problem. A great steward knows how to find the solution. In this case, a steward who is angry at the membership can start solving the problem by — yes, looking in a mirror. The old expression that "you begin changing the world by changing yourself" is never truer than for a discouraged union steward.

Approaching a member with a chip on your shoulder is guaranteed to get a bad response. Negativism is an infection that can seriously harm a steward's effectiveness and will quickly drag down the union. Take a deep breath and resolve to approach each member in a positive way. You will be surprised — or not — that a positive approach brings a positive response.

There are also changes you can make to move your membership forward, especially if there is a critical event like contract negotiations coming up.

One change is the assumption that all of the members either know, or should know, the union contract and should know that if there is a problem, they should call for a steward. In most cases, workers coming into a workplace bring no union background or skills with them. As union membership continues to decline across North America, young workers are less and less likely to come from union families, where dinner table conversation may

have included discussions about union issues.

Workers coming from non-union workplaces usually believe, mentally and emotionally, that the boss is all-powerful and cannot be challenged without great risk. Having a union changes this workplace power dramatically: now, an individual worker has a group to help out, and the existence of the union contract means that the boss's hands are tied in all kinds of ways, from pay rates to disciplinary action. A steward has to understand that members are not "stupid." They are just products of a different system. It's almost as if they speak a different language, one that the steward needs to understand.

An aware, informed membership makes the steward's job easier and the union stronger.

The Steward's Responsibility

If a steward complains about the members' ignorance of large sections of the contract, for example, then the steward needs to take responsibility for teaching them. Offer lunchtime meetings to cover an article each week, or even every day if your members are interested. Select a key clause, like the Recognition clause, overtime pay or the grievance procedure, and quickly explain it to your members. Give examples of recent grievances or issues that relied on the particular clause. If you give the short presentation in the lunch room, or at an outside eating area in nice weather, you will be happily surprised at the number of members who not only pay attention but will offer points of discussion.

If your union is approaching negotiations, members' interest will hit an all-time high. Take advantage of the surge by developing activities to involve each of them, and by consistently giving them accurate information about the negotiations.

Employers will usually flood the workplace with negative "information" about the new contract, so the steward has to be aggressive and thorough to establish control.

A really sharp steward will recruit some veteran members to help out, always understanding that the steward's role in building a union is based on getting other members to do something — anything, really — positive for the local. At all times, it's both a matter of principle and a practical help to develop some "deputies" — solid union members who will help out a steward by understanding both the importance of the union and key

issues as they come up. A steward who tries to do everything, and to be everywhere, is doomed to fail: as you often say to your kids, I only have two hands. The same limits apply to a union steward, so be proactive — get a group together, spread out over whatever shifts and work areas you have to cover, and let them help you carry

the load.

A Change in Thinking

Getting help reflects a change in the steward's thinking — from complaining about what the members won't do, to figuring out what each of them will do, and planning accordingly. It's always helpful to practice "retail unionism" by checking with individual members and getting to know them — their personalities, strengths and concerns. The one-on-one contact will not only tighten up the organization but a steward will quickly appreciate how good it feels to be positive.

The steward will also be surprised at how smart the members suddenly become and how willing they are to begin standing up for themselves and their union. As the union grows stronger, more grievances will be won and the membership — coming full circle — will be pleasantly surprised at how much smarter their steward has become.

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