

Building Unity In the Workplace

One of your most important jobs as a steward is unifying the members in your area to work together and build the union. Building solidarity is essential, especially in tough times, but it can be challenging.

Here are things you can do to build and maintain unity:

Introduce Members to Each Other

Find opportunities for members to get to know each other in comfortable situations like lunches or union social functions. Look for key members to help you connect groups to each other. This could include people who speak more than one language or get along particularly well with lots of different kinds of members.

Keep Members Informed

When members don't know what you as steward are doing, or what others in the union are doing, they sometimes think the worst. They may assume nothing is happening or someone is making deals without their knowledge. That's why it is so important to keep members informed of any union activities or actions you take as a steward.

Stop Rumors

Members hear and repeat rumors all the time. Sometimes rumors lead to arguments, suspicion and divisions. Talk to members about the danger of starting and repeating rumors. Encourage them to not believe rumors about work or the union but instead to come to you so you can get the correct information. If you don't have the information, say you will find out and then always get back to the person—even if it's to say you weren't able to get the facts requested.

Be Inclusive

Actively seek to have all groups where you work involved and represented. This

could mean job titles, workshifts, ages, races, ethnicities, gender, sexual orientations or any other aspect of your co-workers. If you see groups of members who are not involved in the union, get to know one or more people from the group that is not involved. At some point you can discuss why they are not involved and how to turn that around. Often you will find that they stayed out of union activities because they didn't feel welcome or needed.

Reach out to all groups of workers, not just the "regulars."

Be Transparent in Decision-making

Make sure everyone knows what questions the union is considering, how and when the decision will be made, and how the members can get involved. Invite everyone to give their opinions. Talk to members who may not readily volunteer their ideas and ask them to share their thoughts. Once a decision is made, make sure everyone hears about and understands it.

Bridge the Generation Gap

Members with seniority often say that younger workers don't understand or appreciate how hard it was to win the

things the union fought for over many years. Younger or newer members may feel that others in the union don't take their ideas seriously.

If you are one of the senior members, a younger person can help you learn about the concerns of the other generation. Perhaps they have an issue that the union is not addressing. Maybe they feel excluded because at union social events their music doesn't get played or they are turned off by how meetings are run. Once you better understand the younger members you can start finding ways to involve them more in union activities and start a dialogue that can lead to greater unity.

Bring People Together to Address Common Issues

It takes a lot of communication, especially one-on-one discussions with your members, to identify common issues and convince people to work together for solutions. Start with an issue that's winnable and affects many members. Together, discuss ways to resolve the problem and then develop a plan of action to convince management to agree. Once members are involved in a common struggle they are more likely to become a strong, united group, more prepared to fight the big battles that almost always lurk just down the road.

—Ken Margolies. The writer is a senior associate at the Worker Institute at Cornell University.

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