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Young + Old = Union Power

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Young + Old = Union Power

Abstract

[Excerpt] As a steward, whatever your age, your job is to represent and unite members of all generations. This can be challenging, especially when there are barriers to communication and understanding between the "old-timers" and the "kids."

Keywords

union leadership, stewards, age, labor movement, organization, labor rights

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Young + Old = Union Power

If the members you represent are from more than one generation, the odds are good that you've heard these questions more than once:

"Why don't these young kids appreciate the struggles this union went through to win what we have in our contract?"

"How come you older folks always shoot down our ideas and insist on doing things the way you've always done them?"

As a steward, whatever your age, your job is to represent and unite members of all generations. This can be challenging, especially when there are barriers to communication and understanding between the "old-timers" and the "kids."

Telling the Union Story

It's legitimate for the long time members who helped build the union to want newer members to appreciate that history. The timing is critical, however. Probably most of you have an older relative who, when the discussion turns to how easy the younger set has it, brags about having "walked to school barefoot in the snow uphill both ways." If you're a younger person, chances are that such a declaration didn't exactly make you appreciate how good you have it. Well, when unions start off talking to newer members about the union's history it might sound like the walking-to-school story. A better strategy is to listen to what is important to younger members and discuss how the union can address their issues. Later, when they are involved in trying to improve their working conditions, they are more receptive to hearing about the lessons learned in past struggles.

Young members are also justified in feeling their ideas shouldn't be ruled out just because they don't have a lot of experience in the union. Your job as a steward is to convince your experienced members to be more open to new ideas and new activists. You should help newer

members learn the best times and ways to get their ideas heard, while at the same time convincing them to avoid assuming that everything that has been done before needs to be changed.

While it's important not to stereotype anyone because of their age, there are some generalities that can help the generations understand each other better.

Unlike many baby boomers (born after World War II) who tend to define themselves by what they do and how much they work, younger generations tend to see work as only a part of their lives. And while in the past it was not unusual for someone to stay at the same job for most of their working life, it's different today. Now, with outsourcing, layoffs, plant closings and other actions that make jobs less secure, newer workers enter the workforce without the expectation they will stay in any one job very long. As a result, the unions that are most successful at involving younger members focus on their immediate issues and find ways for them to contribute to union activities that don't infringe too much on their personal time.

Communication and Technology

One of the most obvious differences between generations is how they communicate, and particularly their comfort level with technology. Sometimes more senior members belittle their younger co-workers for always "tweeting and texting." Meanwhile, some younger members are impatient with their older co-workers who are slow to adapt to new technology. Many unions have found using e-mail, texting and other newer technologies is a good way to reach members, especially younger members. But, it's important to remember that electronic communications are not a substitute for personal relationship-building: they are just one part of it. And if you can convince younger members to help their senior brothers and sis-



ters with new technology rather than criticize them, it would help build the union.

Building Relationships Is Key

The key to uniting people is building relationships. If in your area members of one generation are less involved than others, you should reach out to the most receptive members from that generation and get to know them. Make connections between generations and help smooth out miscommunications. Consider mentoring programs where each newer member has a more experienced mentor to help them: not only to learn about and get involved in the union, but to guide them in learning "the ropes" at work.

Your job as a steward is to help members of all generations recognize that they need each other, especially in these challenging times, to strengthen the union. Encourage your members to listen and seek to understand each other. Find influential members from each generation to help bring people together around issues and activities that improve everyone's work life.

An entire generation of union leaders and activists is nearing retirement age. Unions need young leaders to step up to replace them and lead the labor movement into the future. If you are one of those with years of experience in union building, your job is to help find and prepare the next generation of leadership. If you are a young leader, you should learn from those who came before and prepare yourself and your peers for the challenges ahead.

— Ken Margolies. The writer is on the labor extension faculty of Cornell University.