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9-1-2001

The Steward's Role in Bargaining

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The Steward's Role in Bargaining

Abstract

[Excerpt] Bargaining a new contract is one of the biggest events in the life of a union, and one that offers stewards many opportunities to build a stronger organization. For many stewards, though, the bargaining process consists of responding the three big questions from the members.

Keywords

union, steward, grievance, agreement, impact, communication, labor, management, members, supervisor, goal, function, arbitrator

Disciplines

Collective Bargaining | Unions

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Suggested Citation

Margolies, K. (2001). The steward's role in bargaining [Electronic version]. *Steward Update*, 12(5).
<http://digitalcommons.ilr.cornell.edu/articles/82/>

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The Steward's Role in Bargaining

Bargaining a new contract is one of the biggest events in the life of the union, and one that offers stewards many opportunities to build a stronger organization. For many stewards, though, the bargaining process consists of responding to three big questions from the members.

Before bargaining starts they ask, "What are we going to get?" When a new contract is reached they ask, "What did we get?" And after they've had time to think about it a little they ask, "Why didn't we get more?"

It doesn't have to be that way. Stewards can educate and involve members so they actively help make the new contract better and understand the process enough to appreciate what it takes to win more.

When members think the outcome of bargaining has little to do with them, the union has a problem. Even the world's best negotiators will find it extremely difficult to win a good contract if the members merely sit back and wait for their "silver-tongued" representatives to bring home the bacon. That's because, in large part, it's what the members say and do that forms management's decisions on what it will yield during bargaining.

This means stewards have a crucial role in involving members in the bargaining process to convince management that they are ready to fight for a good contract.

Seriously Engage Members

Just mailing out a bargaining survey is not enough. Most members these days never fill it out, and many don't totally understand all the issues. While mail surveys are considered successful if 20 percent or 30 percent of members respond, unions that have stewards collect surveys from members can get greater than 90 percent response. The one-to-one approach gives stewards the opportunity to answer questions and really talk about the issues. More members answering surveys and engaging in good discussions about the issues is an excellent way to start the process of getting members involved, and it sends a good message to management.

Teach How Bargaining Works

One way stewards can help members really understand how bargaining works is to ask them to imagine they are part of the man-

agement team setting the employers' bargaining strategy. Have them think about what management wants out of bargaining. Usually, they'll come up with a long list of priorities that basically add up to less for the workers.

Now the steward asks the members who have been role-playing as managers the big question: "What determines how much management agrees to in bargaining?" At this point it dawns on most that bargaining is not as much about reasonable arguments as it is about members' unity and willingness to fight for a good contract.

Educate About the Issues

During the survey process and all through bargaining stewards have a great opportunity to educate members about the issues on the table. Once stewards and activists are trained to effectively communicate the justification for the union's bargaining demands to members, then they are also able to play an important part in winning support from customers, the public, and other unions.

Anticipate, Counter Management Propaganda

Management frequently will communicate with members during bargaining. They might do it through rumors and "off the record" comments from supervisors, through "sincere" letters and bulletins, or perhaps through statements to the media.

The goal of their message is to lower members' expectations and convince them that they should accept whatever management determines is "fair" or "competitive." Sometimes they will get really dirty and spread rumors about "sell-outs" and secret deals, or whatever they think will divide the members and undermine the unions' bargaining team.

That's why many unions hold regular briefings to help stewards stay up to date and informed about the progress of bargaining so they can pass on reliable information to the members. They can also get answers

to members' questions, and clear up rumors and misinformation.

Lead and Mobilize

Having informed members is crucial, but it's not enough. Members have to demonstrate their determination to win a good contract. Working with the union's top leadership, stewards can lead their members in developing and carrying out actions. These can be simple, like everyone wearing buttons or agreeing not to discuss bargaining with their supervisors, or more involved, like unionwide rallies and demonstrations.

Use Your Imagination

Be creative. For example, one group of workers decided to wear red ribbons at a time when bargaining was reaching a critical point. When management asked what the ribbons meant, everyone said, "Code Red," but wouldn't say what that meant. The tactic kept the employer guessing and nervous about what the workers might do.

Along with rallies and other actions, management became convinced that it was best to reach a fair agreement rather than take on the workers.

It takes a lot of one-on-one discussions between stewards and members to get enough participation to make actions successful. Good stewards talk regularly to every member they repre-

sent and keep a chart with phone numbers and other relevant information to make sure they don't forget anyone. This kind of one-on-one contact and list-keeping also helps stewards recruit active members to help with the mobilization.

Follow Through After Agreement

There are many important things for stewards to do once the union and management reach agreement on a new contract. First, make sure members understand the agreement and vote intelligently on whether to ratify it. Then, become very familiar with new parts of the contract so you can lead the members in enforcing it. This is an ideal opportunity to channel the activism you generated during bargaining into keeping management's feet to the fire to live up to the deal. Not only will this make your members' work lives better, but you will be ready to fight for an even better agreement in the next round of negotiations.

— Ken Margolies*. The writer is on the Labor Extension faculty of Cornell University.

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