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STEWARD UPDATE

Getting Involved/Gaining Access

A Guide for Younger Members



Getting Involved/ Gaining Access — A Guide for Younger Members



New research shows that young workers in the US earn \$10,000 less than people their age did 30 years ago, and have half as much wealth – and the numbers are worse for workers of color. (Canadians do not face this problem.) Given the attacks on, and decline in, unions, this number is neither a surprise nor a coincidence. The US labor movement, already less than 12% of the workforce nationwide (and below 7% in the private sector), is also getting older – with 25% of members (and a much greater percentage of leaders and stewards) older than 55.

Changing this downward trajectory for younger workers and for the labor movement will take work and leadership from all of us. In the words of a 2011 convention resolution from the International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers (IBEW), “the continued strength and vitality of the labor movement depends heavily on the ability of younger union members to develop into strong and effective labor leaders...and our union’s ability to attract new members and nurture effective new leadership.”

In the December issue, this publication focused on advice for stewards over 35 on engaging and supporting younger members (find it at www.unionist.com). This time, we speak directly to younger members and stewards: Getting involved in your union can help change your workplace, the labor movement, and conditions for young workers everywhere. Here are some pointers for getting started.

Learn the Backstory

Your union has a history – and you should learn about it! Whichever industry you

work in, it is important to find out about your predecessors’ fights. What was the industry like before unions got involved? How has your union, and the broader labor movement, changed the nature of work in your industry and the country? What were your union’s foundational struggles? Was there a major strike or campaign that helped form your union? To understand and organize with the older membership, it is important to understand the battles they fought and inherited.

Be on the Same Side

The boss and the media are good enough at dividing workers without our help.

“It’s easy to blame older members and leadership for what you may see as failures and mistakes. But remember that you’re on the same side of the bargaining table and who the real enemy is,” suggests Brittany Anderson, national AFL-CIO Young Worker Advisory Committee member from the Retail, Wholesale and Department Store Union (RWDSU).

“When you approach from the perspective that you both care deeply about the union and want to grow and strengthen the labor movement, they’re more likely to listen to and support your ideas and opinions.”

Understand the Nuts and Bolts of Your Union

If you want to get involved or to make change, you must understand how your union operates. Every union has a constitution and bylaws, including the process for meetings, elections, contract votes, and selection of shop stewards. They also may detail how to create a formal young worker committee, for instance.

In addition to formal structures, unions also have informal structures and cultures. When Actors’ Equity (AEA) members wanted to form a young workers committee, they needed to understand both the official steps *as well as* the union’s culture and power dynamics. According to Kate O’Phalen, AEA National Councillor and chair of the young workers committee, “Getting this committee approved required a lot of groundwork before [we] ever brought the motion, officially, to the national council. We unofficially organized some big successes to serve as proof of concept, and put a lot of time into having personal conversations with other board members to allay some of their individual concerns.”

No need to reinvent the wheel! Here are a few suggestions:

■ **Find a guide!** Options include an older member from your local, a young leader from another union, or a rep from your labor council or the AFL-CIO Young Workers, among others.

■ **Take your time** as you build relationships. There are no shortcuts to building relationships with fellow young workers or older leaders within your union. Take time to talk with people and *really* listen to them.

■ **Take action!** By fighting together toward common interests – and against common enemies – you work to build power and trust.

■ **Be persistent.** Making change, building relationships and power, takes time. Keep working and you will find and create the space for involvement and leadership.

—David Unger. The writer is an educator with the Murphy Institute at the City University of New York. Let’s keep the intergenerational conversation going. We welcome readers – whatever your age – to contribute your best experiences of working across generational lines at david.unger@cityu.edu and at the UCS Facebook page: www.facebook.com/UCSWorkerInst

The slogan was simple: *Stop Staples*, and that's just what they did.

After a grueling, three-year campaign, the American Postal Workers Union forced the US Postal Service to cancel its attempt to outsource counter services to office supply giant Staples.

This was a significant victory over creeping privatization of public sector services. The APWU campaign saved many thousands of well-paying jobs – stabilizing workers' lives and communities as well as preserving the value of public postal services. That last is so important it is included in the US Constitution.

"This is also a win for those who care about the neighborhood post office... and for all those in our society who think that workers should earn a fair living wage with decent health care and a pension, rather than the Staples model of minimum wage, part-time hours and no benefits," said APWU President Mark Dimondstein.

Stopping Privatization Already Underway

US workers in the private sector are much less likely to have a union – only 6.4% of private-sector workers have unions, compared to 34.45% of public-sector workers – and have much less power over private companies and in that segment of the economy as a whole. According to Glassdoor.com, hourly wages at Staples start at approximately \$9.00, whereas postal workers start much above that – around \$15.00 and up plus benefits and, of course, due process and other union protections that at-will, unrepresented workers don't have.

Staples had opened so-called mini-post offices in 2013 and subsequently expanded the program to some 540 store counters. With the cancellation of the program, the USPS and Staples shelved plans to add 1600 more and will close existing ones.

The APWU started the campaign in 2013, after the USPS and Staples started a trial outsourcing project and refused to include the union. The APWU escalated to a boycott in 2014, urging customers not to buy at the big-box office supply retailer.

The campaign included a website, a text-to-join feature for supporters to sign up, as well as a public and successful fight to block a Staples-Office Depot merger. The heart of the campaign, however, were

Lessons from the Stop Staples Win

person-to-person conversations held outside Staples store fronts across the country. The Stop Staples effort depended on volunteers, including shop stewards, who stood on informational picket lines day after day.

In all, success was due to the nationwide mobilization of thousands of members and non-members. For example, the picketing around San Francisco was organized by Local 2 longtime shop steward Alan Menjivar, who used his 34 years of Postal Service job experience to convince members to join the phone banks, meet with other postal unions and stand outside Staples stores – some at malls as far as 100 miles from the city.

"We started in 2014 with big meetings in San Francisco and the South Bay that drew hundreds of people – many from other unions," Menjivar said. "Then, we held a day of action on January 28 of that year. It took us three years to win."

At first, he said, the strategy was to make a lot of noise in front of Staples stores, often chanting "The US Mail is not for sale!" That morphed into handing out fliers and engaging customers in conversation.

They used four teams of seven to nine members, who moved from store to store, often putting in 55 to 65 hours a week, Menjivar told me. Although many were active workers who took leaves from their jobs, he noted that, "This win was possible because of the participation of retirees."

Solidarity FTW*

In addition to active support from the APWU membership, the campaign's success can be attributed to the support of other unions and the AFL-CIO, as well as community groups, all of which backed the effort.

The campaign got a necessary and added boost when the two biggest teachers unions in the US, the American Federation of Teachers and the National Education Association, joined in. That's because as

much as one-third of all Staples revenue comes from the sale of school supplies.

In 2014, NEA President Dennis Van Roekel wrote to USPS CEO Patrick R. Donahoe, saying, "NEA does not support – and never will – the outsourcing of essential public services to untrained workers in private companies with lower standards."

"The AFT was proud to support the boycott and defend middle-class jobs and the services Americans rely on. And our members' participation made a real difference," AFT President Randi Weingarten wrote recently.

One of the main points of leverage was also due to budget cuts: teachers are increasingly paying for supplies themselves, as funding cuts hit their classrooms. "I usually spend a couple hundred dollars at the beginning of the school year and maybe \$25-50 a month the rest of the year," said New Jersey English teacher Elizabeth Schofield Schappert, an NJEA member. She noted that "the last few years have been tighter than when I started teaching 13 years ago."

Privatization Parallels

"You see so many parallels," explained journalist Jennifer Berkshire, who covers public education. "When you have some core public service, the pressure on the privatize end is to cut costs, and that inevitably interferes with the delivery of that important service. The main cost, whether it's teaching or postal work, is labor, so you inevitably see a big push to replace [union-won gains]," she said. "It's not sustainable, either for the workers or our community."

That's why the Stop Staples campaign was an important victory over the forces of privatization, and a win for workers and communities.

—Alec Dubro is a veteran labor communicator based in Washington, DC.

* FTW is short for For The Win

Protecting the Rights of Pregnant & Nursing Members

Too often, employers force pregnant and breastfeeding workers out of their jobs, or deny them accommodations they need to continue working, despite legal and collectively bargained protections. Jessica Craddock, a grocery worker in Tennessee, sued her employer for just that – illegally pushing her out of her job.

“I could do the work – I just needed to avoid heavy lifting,” Craddock said last year. Being forced out on leave without pay, she said, “was incredibly stressful for me and my family, and we are still trying to recover financially.”

Women's Issues are Union Issues

Discrimination forces pregnant and breastfeeding women to choose between their health and the health of their babies, or supporting their families. In the US and Canada, women make up about half of the workforce, and about half of union members, and discrimination is widespread, though underreported. Three-quarters of women now entering the workforce will become pregnant while working. Shop stewards can play an important role in protecting everyone's rights by standing up for the rights of pregnant and nursing women in the workplace.

“Some of the most dynamic union leadership right now is coming from women workers,” said MN Nurses Association Political Organizer Geri Katz. “Many come from female-dominated professions that still have to deal with patriarchal b.s. every day: lack of respect, attempts to dumb down their professions and cut their pay or outsource their jobs, etc.”

That's why, said veteran labor activist Ellen Bravo, “for decades unions have led the fight for child care, an end to pregnancy discrimination, adequate paid sick days and affordable family leave. Unions know that all their members gain when women demand just and equitable treatment.”

A number of labor and women's organizations, including the Center for WorkLife Law, Labor Project for Working Families, AFL-CIO, SEIU, and A Better Balance, put together a guide to help stewards navigate the challenges associated with pregnancy and breastfeeding. Topics include counseling members, talking with management, and filing relevant grievances – as well as helping workers who lack union representation. *The Shop Steward's Guide to Counseling and Representing Pregnant Workers* is available at no charge at www.laborbooks.com/Item/stewcounseling.

Enforcement Matters

The effects of discrimination on pregnant or breastfeeding members can be catastrophic to the member, her family, and to the morale and solidarity of the unit. It's important that the union enforces everyone's rights – it makes the “union difference” evident to members and gives everyone a reason to support unions, because unions raise standards for all workers.

“Union contracts can provide stronger rights than the law (especially when there are gaps in the law), and as a result can improve the health, economic security and well-being of the entire workforce and their families, not just women,” Katz said.

Workers who are unrepresented, as Armanda Legros was, have a much harder time enforcing their rights. Legros's employer pushed her out of her job while she was pregnant. “I used to have some security. I used to be able to support my family and myself. ... I hate knowing this happens to other women in New York and all over the country,” she told a New York State committee during a hearing.

Had Armanda had a union, her steward could have filed a grievance, as the Communications Workers of America did for member Catherine Bishop when the Mountain States Telephone Company discriminated against her during pregnancy.

The Steward's Guide details how an arbitrator ruled for Bishop, awarding her back pay and the opportunity to transfer to a new position.

Supporting Members

1 Ensure that all members know that pregnant and breastfeeding members have rights, without singling any members out.

2 Review your contract and the *Guide* for enforceable protections.

3 There are no magic words a woman must use to tell the boss she's pregnant, but the *Guide* provides some important tips to keep in mind.

4 Pregnant workers are not required to bring a doctor's note when informing management about their pregnancy. Because employers sometimes use medical notes to force women off the job, only provide one if necessary to request an accommodation or leave.

5 When an accommodation for pregnancy or breastfeeding is needed, women should specify exactly their needs or job restrictions, and should also emphasize that *they can continue to work* with reasonable accommodation. Examples of a reasonable accommodation may include:

- a stool for sitting
- a water bottle
- assistance with heavy lifting
- additional breaks
- a modified schedule
- time off for medical appointments
- a private space and time for pumping breastmilk
- light duty assignment

Ensuring fair and equal treatment for pregnant and breastfeeding women on the job promotes goals fundamental to the labor movement – worker safety, job security, wage protection, and, most of all, solidarity.

—Liz Morris is the deputy director of the Center for WorkLife Law and an adjunct law professor at UC Hastings College of the Law. She co-wrote *The Shop Steward's Guide to Counseling and Representing Pregnant Workers*.



This is the first of an occasional series on current issues written by authors of books available at www.laborbooks.com. What do you think? Whom do you want to Comment? Let us know on the Union Communication Services Facebook page or by writing us at info@unionist.com.

We live in a moment when politics are shifting so rapidly it can be hard to understand what's happening each day – but what is clear is that union rights are, more than ever, under attack.

At the same time, union rights are not the only ones in the crosshairs. And this, somewhat counterintuitively, provides the labor movement with excellent opportunities to make new allies and grow its power.

The premise of my book, *Necessary Trouble: Americans in Revolt*, is that the 2008 financial crisis was a fundamental turning point in American politics, kicking off an era of mass protest, direct action, disruption, and change. Since the 2016 election, huge protests have amplified the work that was going on before. Women marched for their rights, union activists flooded state houses to protest attacks on collective bargaining, and immigrants have gone on strike to demonstrate their importance to the country. In a time of increasing and increasingly visible economic and social inequality, labor has a central role to play in the struggle for justice, and local unions can play a central role in turn by reviving a fighting labor movement capable of changing the direction of history.

Part of a Bigger Movement

The victories for labor and for the broader society that I detail in my book came when labor saw itself as an integral part of a bigger movement. When Occupy Wall Street hit the streets, for example, union leaders and rank-and-file members joined the protests, donated money and goods, turned out for massive supportive marches. On the morning of a planned eviction of the New York City encampment, a wall of union members marched in – orange shirts for LiUNA, blue from the United Auto Workers, red for National Nurses United. I stood behind a LiUNA member holding his phone high so his mother, a veteran of the 1960s movements, could hear the announcement that, because of the solidarity of the union members and others who had come to stand by the occupation, the eviction was canceled. The protests, which brought discussion of class inequality back to the nation with the “We Are the 99%” framework, could continue.

The One-Day Strike

When the Chicago Teachers Union went on strike in 2012, their power came from having built a base in the broader community through communication with their natural allies: public school parents. The caucus that took power in the union in 2010 had built itself up from a book club that read books about the economic crisis and the austerity policies imposed on their city, and it began immediately organizing

both internally and externally, connected to the anger of parents and students. When the strike happened, “The community had a better sense than normal that we weren’t just striking over a pay raise,” Jennifer Johnson, a Chicago teacher, told me.

The CTU used a tactic that was popularized by the Fight for \$15 and OUR Walmart in order to help avert a second strike and win a groundbreaking contract that freed extra funds for the schools: the one-day strike. On April 1, 2016, the union called a one-day strike that drew community organizations, members of Black Lives Matter, and workers from around the city into a major demonstration of power that brought administrators to the bargaining table. Everyone understood that the city was with the workers.

The one-day strike has been used to powerful effect by non-union workers, whose willingness to go out carries additional risk and has won gains for the entire working class – including minimum wage increases and sick leave policies. Recently, in response to anti-immigrant and anti-refugee policies by the Trump administration as well as local politicians, immigrant workers have also used the tactic to demonstrate their importance and power. In Milwaukee, a massive strike rallied thousands of immigrants downtown on February 13, 2017 for a “Day Without Latinos, Immigrants, and Refugees.” “Immigrant and refugee communities, and those that stand with them, are not going to be pushed into the shadows. We’re not going to let our constitutional rights to be stripped away from all of us, nor allow discriminatory laws to be legalized,” said Christine Neumann-Ortiz, executive director of Voces de la Frontera, a community organization that organized the action.

Power of Solidarity

The strike is sometimes called “labor’s ultimate weapon.” And there’s a growing call for strikes – by immigrants, by women and by the population at large.

— Sarah Jaffe is the author of *Necessary Trouble: Americans in Revolt*, available at www.laborbooks.com. Readers of this publication can take 15% off until May 30 by entering *SURreader* at checkout. Jaffe covers labor for a wide variety of national publications and co-hosts the *Belabored* podcast.

OPEIU Steward Update is a bi-monthly newsletter for the information and education of OPEIU's dedicated stewards.

Using Words that Work

In today's uncertain environment where attacks on working people and their right to unionize are commonplace, it's vital that we all step up our commitment to organize and mobilize to reach out to new members and increase engagement among existing ones.

To do that, we must choose the right words that will resonate when talking with them, especially when reaching out to new employees who might not become connected to their union otherwise.

Here are some examples of words to avoid, and others that we can use to greater effect in our conversations and written materials:

WORDS TO AVOID AND REPLACE

Workers
[X] workers
Better wages and benefits
All/every/always
Labor unions
Good for (our) economy, productivity
Strength in numbers
Make my/your voice heard,
make my/your life better
If we join, if we act, if we commit
(Economic) inequality
Put into action, build power together
Collective bargaining
Union contract

Source: ASO Communications, Lake Research Partners

WORDS TO USE AND EMBRACE

Working people
People who work in [X]
Earn a good living while having a life
Some/many/often
Unions of working people
Good for our country/America/families/working people/communities
Power in numbers
Bring change, strengthen our communities

When we join, by acting in union, by making a commitment
(Economy) out of balance, too much wealth in too few hands
Retake the reins, set the rules, united we stand
Negotiate collectively
Negotiated contract



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