

# UNION STEWARD

## FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

UNITED ELECTRICAL, RADIO AND MACHINE WORKERS OF AMERICA • MARCH 2020

# SENIORITY BASICS

Joe, the union chief steward, was approached one morning by Hank, a third shift employee, who was very low on the seniority list. “Hey Joe,” said Hank. “I have a question.”

“What’s up?” replied Joe.

“Well, you know there’s a lot of talk going around about layoffs.”

“Those happen from time-to-time but we haven’t heard anything definite yet,” said Joe.

Hank continued, “Well I was asking my foreman about it and he said if it was up to him I wouldn’t get laid off, but because of the union rules, I’ll be one of the first to go. That doesn’t seem right; I’m a good worker and I need the job.”

“Hey, we’re not the ones doing the layoffs, the company is; we’re just trying to make them treat everyone fair,” replied Joe.

### **Why do we have seniority systems?**

Seniority systems started with an attempt by workers to solve the problem of management favoritism and discrimination. This is a central belief of unions, that all workers

should be treated equally and fairly.

This problem of management being in total control is what propelled many workers to form unions. Think what the work place would be like if only the employer got to decide the following:

- Who works each day;
- Who gets which jobs;
- How much each worker get paid;
- Who gets overtime;
- Who gets laid off;
- Who gets recalled from a lay off;
- How much vacation a worker gets;
- When do they get to take vacation time off?

If only the boss gets to decide this, it always leads to a system of favoritism and discrimination. It pits worker against worker in trying to curry the bosses’ favor in order to get a pay raise or time off. One method of limiting the management’s control over all aspects of a workers life was to determine who gets what by something that is very measurable and can’t be twisted by management. That “thing” was how many years of service a worker has with the employer. This measurable item, “years of service”

is the basis for seniority systems.

The benefits of using “seniority” becomes very clear in terms of how employees get pay raises in order to reach the top rate of the job.

Under a “merit pay” plan, workers get pay raises (especially new employees whose starting rate of pay is lower than the normal rate of pay) when the employer decides they deserve one. Under a pay plan governed by seniority, an employee gets moved up the pay scale according to how much time they have with the employer. The pay raises are automatic, based upon seniority.

### **Seniority systems are a result of bargaining**

Most seniority systems are a result of bargaining between the union and the employer and they also reflect what was in place before the union was built by the workers.

In the UE, like every other union there are many variations on seniority systems, but all exist because there was unfairness in the workplace. All of them are attempts to take away the employer’s ability to play favorites or discriminate.

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