

UE STEWARD

FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

UNITED ELECTRICAL, RADIO AND MACHINE WORKERS OF AMERICA • JUNE 2021

FIGHTING CONCESSIONS

It's been a rough year for UE members at BIPCO Parts. The shop has been running throughout the pandemic, but they've been consistently understaffed due to folks staying home with illness and some staying home to take care of their kids since schools have been closed. Members have not had any vacation requests approved, and morale is low. The contract is up for negotiation soon.

At the end of a recent grievance meeting, the plant manager, Jeff Beez, told the chief steward Lucy Parsnips, "Don't get the members' hopes up for raises this year. If our costs go up any more, we'll have to close the plant. No one wants that." Lucy was shocked. She retorted, "That's pretty hard to believe, Jeff. We've all seen the new truck you just bought yourself, and we all know you are having trouble hiring new workers." Jeff scowled back. "Hey," he said, "I'm just telling you to lower expectations."

Beware the Threat of Concessions

UE locals preparing for contract negotiations are hearing similar refrains in both the private and the public sector. Bosses love to take advantage of uncertainty to grow their profits at our expense, and the lack of clarity about what is coming next in our almost-post-pandemic economy is no different.

This is an important time for UE leaders and stewards to take a look at how the bigger economic picture will impact their specific workplace. There's a lot to consider, and the effects vary depending on the kind of work at each shop.

The boss might tell the union, "We can't find anyone to work right now." Be sure to point out that the way to solve that problem is to make the workplace more attractive by improving starting wages and benefits and not dipping into the pockets of current workers. The job market is competitive right now. As more workers get vaccinated and as schools reopen for in-person instruction next fall, more working people will be ready to return to the workforce. If your workplace is hiring new workers, or needs to because members are working too much overtime, this is a great opportunity for the union to demand improvements for new hires--and that current workers get a proportional increase in their wages too.

If your local wins improved conditions for new hires, be sure to update your local's literature for new hires to reflect this victory. Use this as an organizing opportunity to grow enthusiasm for the union once new workers come into the shop.



The boss might tell the union, "Things have been so bad, we had to get government help." Reinforce with the boss that these funds were intended to keep people employed and provide relief from working under very stressful conditions. Many employers received government assistance to stay afloat during the pandemic, and the union should plan to include questions about any such funds in their bargaining information request. Many private businesses collected funds from the Paycheck Protection Program, and state and local governments have been given direct funding from the federal government. If your employer received such funding, this is not a time for concessions. Instead, the union must demand that workers benefit from these programs, not bosses.

There are other larger unknown trends: Will students return to colleges and universities after this year's low enrollment? How have cooking and dining out habits changed? Global supply chains are disrupted, both because of pandemic-related workforce shortages and also ripple effects from delayed shipments in the Suez Canal. How long will it take for a smooth flow of goods to resume? These also impact working conditions at many UE locals, from workers at universities to cereal plants to plastic manufacturing.

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There are always challenges in our economy, and bosses are simply using new problems to make the same old request to increase their profits at the workers' expense. UE locals, with assistance from a staff person, should make their own assessment of the economic well-being of their workplace, not take the word of plant manager Beez or any other boss.

Don't get demoralized by a demand for concessions. Instead, use it to get members involved in the fight for a good contract.

Assess the Members

In order to fight for the best jobs possible, UE leaders must reach out to members to determine our needs as we prepare for negotiations. Survey the members, using the steward system to make sure to reach workers in all parts of the shop.

As with any contract campaign, know what the members' priorities are. Are they mad because they didn't get hazard pay despite working during the pandemic? Are they concerned about improving paid sick leave in case COVID-19 or another virus attacks in the future? Do members want to keep in place a work-from-home option that evolved during the pandemic?

The union needs a plan which members can rally around. Let's make this program take priority over the boss's demands.

In 2020, the University of Vermont proposed to UE Local 267 to raise wages for the lowest-paid workers, but to cut wages for workers in higher pay grades. The membership voted to pursue flat across-the-board wage increases, which would especially benefit lower-wage workers but without cutting other workers' pay. They won a contract which brings all workers up to \$15/hour

while increasing wages for all workers.

When Daikin Industries presented Local 123 with proposals that would have completely rewritten and gutted the contract's provisions on seniority, hours of work and overtime, members organized marches through the plant on their breaks, chanting and demonstrating their displeasure with the company's proposals — which were swiftly withdrawn.

Keep Members United

If a boss does demand concessions, there's no need to hide that from the members. Use those concession requests to organize members against the boss and the company's demands. Make sure to use this as an opportunity to unite all workers by focusing attention on bosses who care little about the work itself or our members, and have their priority on maximizing profits at our expense.

If bosses propose concessions for future workers, reject their attempt to create a two-tier system. A basic principle of unionism is "equal pay for equal work." This means that people doing the same or comparable job should receive the same hourly or salaried pay. This slogan was coined to deal with employer favoritism-- attempts to keep workers fighting each other ("how come he gets more money than me") and to combat outright discrimination. Agreeing to a two-tier system undermines union

solidarity. In many cases even though it was the employer that demanded the two-tier system, the members may blame the union's leadership for agreeing to it — even if an agreement was made under a threat of closing the workplace or contracting out our work. It is easier for some workers to blame their co-workers than to blame a boss.

Having two tiers also gives the boss an incentive to harass and get rid of folks in the first tier. In the long run, as higher paid employees retire or quit, the wage rates will continue to get lower, thus erasing years of hard work by union members to improve their wages and working conditions. The union can't afford to agree to two tiers.

Make sure member unity is visible to the boss. Make a plan to show members in action, ready to fight for respect on the job. Start with simple actions like union buttons or shirts, and escalate as needed.

Concessions Won't Work

We have heard requests for concessions from bosses before. Management tries to tell workers that we're all in this together, that workers taking home less today will benefit everyone tomorrow. But this isn't how things play out.

When "concession bargaining" swept across union workplaces in the 1980s, some unions took the bait, agreeing to give back hard-earned wage increases with the promise of keeping work at a given shop. It did not go well. In many cases, those plants closed anyway. In others, union leaders lost the trust of their membership and the lack of solidarity made it impossible to win back what was lost at the bargaining table.

UE took a different approach and at the 1981 convention formally adopted a resolution to fight concessions during bargaining. As then Secretary-Treasurer Boris "Red" Block told the 1984 convention, "Our record ... clearly shows that while others spent their time concocting sugar-coated but in truth bitter pills, rationales to make concessions, to agree to givebacks in the guise of equality of sacrifice, we in UE dug in our heels and in no uncertain terms told the bosses that, as working people, we have nothing to give back. And when necessary we backed our position with united action on the shop floor, in our communities and when required on the picket line."

UE locals have continued to practice militant fights against concessions demanded by employers. This includes everything from the 2019 strike by Locals 506 and 618 in Erie against their new employer, Wabtec, to public sector members in Connecticut Local 222 attending bargaining as a group to get their employer to back off their attempt to gut health care in early 2020.

When UE locals stand up to create and maintain dignity at work, our communities benefit. Don't let members buy into management's line.