

U\$TEWARD

FIRST LINE OF DEFENSE

UNITED ELECTRICAL, RADIO AND MACHINE WORKERS OF AMERICA • SEPTEMBER 2019

A UNION STEWARD'S BIGGEST MISATKES



A good steward is many things - an organizer, a negotiator, a counselor, a peace-maker and a troublemaker.

But there are certain things that a steward must avoid at all costs:

Mistake 1 - Failing to Represent Fairly

Not only can this leave the union open to being sued for breaching its duty to provide fair representation, it's just not the right thing to do. It undermines the whole purpose of the union and the very idea of solidarity. Every grievance should be weighed on its own merits, regardless of who files it.

Mistake 2 - Making Backroom Deals

Management is notorious for trying to get stewards to trade grievances. "I'll let you have this case if you drop the one we talked about yesterday." Every member deserves a fair shake and every grievance needs to be evaluated on its own merit. *Never agree to anything you would be uncomfortable telling your entire membership about.* Any group settlement of grievances should be done by the entire union committee, not the

steward by themselves.

Mistake 3 - Failing To Organize

Stewards are much more than grievance handlers. They are the key people in the local who mobilize the membership. They must be **talkin' union and fightin' union** all the time. Each and every grievance and incident must be looked at in terms of how it can increase participation, build the union, and create new leaders. The union is built by involving the members in winning grievances. From wearing buttons and stickers, to signing petitions, working to rule or acting as witnesses for the union during grievance meetings, these actions help build the union.

Mistake 4 - Promising Remedies Too Quickly

You're hurting both the member and your credibility if you pass judgment on a grievance prior to a thorough investigation. Only after you have spoken to the grievant and witnesses and consulted the contract, the employer's rules and past practices are you in a position to make that determination. Given the frequency of poor and mixed arbitration decisions, no steward should make promises

about the expected outcome of a grievance.

Mistake 5 - Failing To Speak With New Workers

The most important way a union gains the support of a new member or a potential new member is by one-on-one contact with the steward. You not only want to provide new workers with information, but need to build a personal relationship and begin to get them involved in union activities from their first day on the job. The steward should provide the new worker with a copy of the union contract, and sign the worker up into the union, and not leave that to management.

Mistake 6 - Failing To Adhere To Time Lines

Even the strongest, iron-clad case can be lost if the time line specified in your contract isn't followed. Even if management agrees to an extension, it is not in the union's interest to let problems fester and grow. If you do get a formal extension of time limits, be sure to get it in writing. If you can't get

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it in writing make sure there are other union witnesses present.

Mistake 7 - Letting A Grievance Go Un-filed

Every grievance that goes un-filed undermines the contract people struggled hard to win. While most members see changes and problems only in terms of the impact on them, the steward needs to be able to understand a grievance's impact on the contract and the union as a whole. Remember, the union has the right to file a grievance even if the worker involved doesn't want to. When a basic principle is involved that could affect other workers, the steward should file the grievance.

Mistake 8 - Meeting With Management Alone

When you meet with management alone, suspicions may arise as to what kinds of deals you might be making. It also allows management to lie or change its story. More importantly, when the steward meets with management alone, it takes away an opportunity for members to participate in the union and to understand that it's really their organization. Sometimes it is hard to avoid meeting with a supervisor or foreman alone. They approach you at your workplace or call you into their

office. If this happens, be sure you tell the other union reps what the discussion was about.

Mistake 9 - Failing To Get Settlements In Writing

Just as you should protect yourself by not meeting alone with management, be sure to get any settlement in writing. Putting the settlement in writing helps clarify the issues and keeps management from backing down. Many grievances are settled before they get to the written stage of the procedure. The steward should keep a notebook with all the important information concerning the settlement. Who was involved, what was the issue and what was the settlement. Remember, a grievance is any problem that arises. The hundreds of day-to-day issues that never reach the written grievance stage can be very important when trying to prove past practice. Facts, not vague memories, are needed to prove past practice.

Mistake 10 - Passing the Buck

It is the steward's responsibility to deal with the members in their area—keep them informed, investigate problems, decide whether to grieve matters and do the first-step oral presentation of the grievance. Sometimes stewards are tempted to pass the buck and refer members to the union president or another union officer. While it is important to get

advice and support if you are unsure about how to proceed, having a strong union means everyone does their part.

Mistake 11 - Failing to Work as a Union Team

Stewards are most effective when they work as a team. Each steward should know what is happening in different work areas. Stewards should check with the chief steward, other officers or even older union members to make sure they understand past practices that may exist in the workplace.

Mistake 12 - Failing To Publicize Victories

Publicizing each and every victory is an important way to build your local union. This publicity not only has a chilling effect on the employer, but helps educate our own members on their contractual rights. All too often, members don't hear about union successes. Let them know we've won and that it's a victory for the entire union. It gives you something to celebrate, helps build pride in the union and builds the inspiration needed to carry on.

Based on "A Union Steward's Ten Biggest Mistakes" by Tom Juravich and Kate Bronfenbrenner, with additions by The UE Steward.

A Basic Review: Steward's Rights

Don't let the boss con you. As a *UE Steward*, you've been elected to represent your members—a job that most bosses would like to keep you from doing. Here's a brief list of some of your rights.

1 You have the **RIGHT to grieve about unfair treatment**—whether you saw it happen or someone calls it to your attention. Bosses may accuse you of "soliciting grievances," but don't be fooled! It's your duty to encourage workers to grieve about legitimate issues—or file them yourself.

2 You have the **RIGHT to carry out investigations of grievances**, including interviews of grievants and witnesses. Most UE contracts provide for investigation on "company time." For those that don't, there is often a clear past practice that allows this. But, if not, every grievance must be

investigated as thoroughly as necessary, even if it's on your own time.

3 You have the **RIGHT to organize and encourage your fellow workers to take action** in support of an issue or grievance, so long as it doesn't take place on work time and interfere with production. The boss can't stop you from getting people to wear stickers, sign petitions, carry signs, or take similar actions on break or lunch time. (Of course, stickers, buttons and caps can be worn *all* the time, unless there's a special reason for a dress code.)

4 You have the **RIGHT to request the information** you need to investigate and determine whether there is a grievance, or process a grievance, from management. You should put these requests in writing. Management is obligated to respond (see *Information Requests, UE Steward Handbook, page 36.*)

5 You have the **RIGHT to be present in any meeting** between the boss and an employee if it might lead to discipline (see *Weingarten Rights, UE Steward Handbook, page 15.*)

6 You have the **RIGHT to be present every time a grievance is being "adjusted" or settled**. Even if a worker has taken up the grievance on their own, the boss can't bypass the union when responding.

7 You have the **RIGHT to stand toe-to-toe with your boss when you're conducting union business**. You can get loud, angry, forceful, and speak your mind during grievance meetings. This is the "Equality Principle" that says you and the boss are equals in grievance discussions (see *The Equality Rule, UE Steward Handbook, page 12.*)