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Steward's Corner: Taking Bottom-Up Action Changes the Balance of Power

May 09, 2024 / Ellen David Friedman

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Involving many co-workers to develop a comprehensive demand makes it hard for management to ignore or refuse. Photo: Jim West, jimwestphoto.com (<http://jimwestphoto.com>)

Consider two different ways a union can take action to solve problems. A top-down approach may solve the immediate workplace problem, but it may not change the balance of power. Engaging as many members as possible in a bottom-up approach may accomplish both goals.

For example, consider the case at right where a boss unilaterally announces an unpopular new schedule, and how things might play out depending which approach you take, top-down vs. bottom-up.

In the first week, the approach on the left might appear more forceful—immediate action is taken! But a request to bargain is an action that the boss knows how to ignore. The longer it drags on, the more disaffected the members become.

By taking their time and talking among themselves in a well-organized way, the members of the union on the right side of the graphic below not only involve many co-workers and develop a comprehensive demand, but also make their demand very difficult for the boss to ignore or refuse.

Ellen David Friedman is a retired organizer for Vermont NEA and a member of the Labor Notes board. This article is excerpted from a new book she is writing about organizing.

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The boss unilaterally announces a new work schedule.

Top-Down Action

Week 1: The union president talks to the boss. The boss holds firm on the schedule.

The president sends a message to members saying the union will file a request to bargain the impact of the new schedule.

Week 2: No response from the boss on the request to bargain.

Week 3: No response from the boss on the request to bargain.



Week 4: No response from the boss on the request to bargain. A grievance is filed.

Week 5: No response to the grievance. The president sends a communication saying a grievance is in process.

Week 6: The boss imposes the new schedule.

Individual grievances are filed for affected members.

Week 6-12: Grievances languish.

Week 13: Grievances are denied and sent to arbitration.

Week 27: Arbitration is scheduled.

Week 34: Arbitration is held.

Week 37: Grievances are denied. The new schedule is retained.

Bottom-Up Action

Week 1: Members affected by the proposed schedule change start talking, complaining, and meeting with stewards to brainstorm a response.

Ten-minute meetings are organized throughout the workplace to discuss the new schedule. Lots of questions and complaints surface.

Week 2: Stewards, grievance reps, and board members meet to compile complaints and generate answers to questions.

The president sends communication to members summarizing shared concerns and calling a general meeting.

Stewards post notices about the general meeting and talk to co-workers to encourage attendance.

Week 3: At the general meeting a plan is adopted to conduct face-to-face survey meetings to collate objections to the new schedule and possible alternatives.

Survey meetings are scheduled. The president sends a communication announcing the survey meetings, with time and place.

Stewards post notices about the survey meetings and talk to co-workers to encourage attendance.

Week 4: Survey meetings are held and the results are compiled.

The president seeks volunteers for a committee to draft an alternative schedule.

The committee meets and issues a proposed alternative schedule, distributed to all members for discussion. Revisions are made.

Week 5: The president calls a general meeting to review and adopt the alternative schedule.

The alternative schedule is printed in petition form and distributed for members to sign on.

The alternative schedule is presented to the boss by a large delegation of members.

Week 6: The boss—reluctantly—accepts the alternative schedule.

Members celebrate.



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