

The Toxic Boss

Julia is a new supervisor recently hired by the DBR (Department of Bureaucracy and Red tape) in the town of Metropolis. Julia came out of a non-union private sector environment, and is intent on proving that she can run a department more efficiently than the old “hacks” that she considers city employees to be.

Her tactic has been to foment division among the employees she supervises. Some she cultivates and shows favor to. Others she targets for abuse. She assigns them impossible workloads, and then berates them for not getting the work done in time. She scolds them and insults them in front of other staff. She yells at them in one-on-one meetings. She carefully scrutinizes and questions their requests for time off, while okaying the requests from her “favorites” without question.

As a result, 5 staff members—4 who are targets of Julia’s abuse, and one who has witnessed it and is concerned — approach you (the union steward) to ask for help. They say they dread coming to work every day. Two of them have physical symptoms: one has been getting frequent headaches; the other has had a rise in blood pressure and experiences heart palpitations.

You find out that there are 7 other unit members in the Department. Three are Julia’s “favorites”. The other 4 are unwilling to speak up.

There is no language about bullying in your union contract. The closest thing is the preamble, which states: “The parties agree to act at all times in such a manner as to assure proper dignity and respect for all City employees and for the people they serve.”

What can you do?

- 1.) Is there a grievance here, and if so, based on what?
- 2.) Instead of or in addition to filing a group grievance, what can you do to
 - Resolve the problem *and*
use the issue to:
 - Organize your membership/build more involvement in the local
 - Show the employer how strong the local is, and
 - Chalk up a WIN for the union.

Brainstorm a list of possible actions. Be creative. Don't exclude any idea as too outrageous.

Select the tactic(s) that seems most likely to succeed and to meet the above goals. Flesh out your plan a bit. We will share all our plans with the whole group.

Michael's Grievance

You are a steward in a DPW unit.

One of the truck drivers, Michael, comes to you with a letter he says he received yesterday. It's a notice of suspension for insubordination.

"They wanted me to move a vehicle that was unsafe. I told them the brakes were bad, and refused to move it."

What would you ask Michael? _____

Who else would you talk to? _____

What other information do you need? _____

Where will you look for this information? _____

Additional Information for Michael's Grievance:

Michael tells you:

"I was driving back in at the end of the day. Halfway back, I noticed my brakes were spongy. I kept driving, really slowly, and using the engine to slow down whenever possible."

"Just as I was about to reach the Yard, my foot went all the way to the floor. I drove into the Yard in low gear, and stopped with the parking brake. I left the truck right there; I didn't put it in a parking place."

"I went into the building, reported the brake problem, got my stuff and went out the door. I was already a half hour late going home."

"That's when my supervisor yelled at me to come back and get the truck out of the way before leaving. I refused. I told him it had no brakes. He went apesh*t on me and shouted that I had to obey. But I just turned around and walked away."

"That supervisor is out to get me because I'm gay, and I stick up for my rights! This isn't the first time he's tried to make trouble for me."

You checked on a couple of things:

- The brake problem had been reported. The mechanics found a slow leak in the master cylinder. The fluid was low.
- You found someone else in the Department who overheard the exchange. The Supervisor had lost his temper. On the other hand, Michael had not been very cooperative.
- It is well known in the Department that Michael and the Supervisor dislike each other.

Michael's Personnel File Says:

- Michael was hired 8 years ago. He has a good work record, and no past disciplinary action.