

Even before the *Janus* decision, anti-unionism continued apace in both the US and Canada. To challenge it, union stewards need both new strategies and new attitudes so that solidarity will rule in every workplace.

To do so, stewards must think of themselves as organizers, not grievance processors. In most unions, stewards carefully prepare each grievance, meet as a small group with management, appeal it and eventually take the case to arbitration. This costs the union tens of thousands of dollars, and it risks putting important workplace issues in the hands of a totally disinterested individual arbitrator.

STRATEGY FAIL

Put plainly, this strategy has failed. As the anti-union movement racks up more wins, expanding “open shop” laws, more unhappy members drop out.

As a result, our unions’ existence is at stake. With most grievances, the members—and non-members—never get involved, so the union loses both power over management and the opportunity to show the non-members how important the union is, 24/7/365. Now, instead of expecting Someone Else to defend the contract, everyone is asked to become active participants—to be the union. And stewards are the ones to ask, and agitate, motivate, and, yes, organize this change.

NEW GOAL

Becoming an organizer also requires different strategies than grievance processing. Because the goal is to involve all our members, and reach out to the non-members, how-to-juice-participation becomes a question we ask of every decision we make and every grievance we file. In fact, even using the words “strategy” and “grievances” in the same sentence shows a clear break from the old routine of filing grievances.

HOW TO GET STARTED

- Think organizationally. As you plan the grievance, also calculate how your members—and non-members—can get involved. As the non-members become active, they are way-y-y more likely to join.
- Prowl your workplace. Ask members what problems they want the union to deal with so you can find new, energizing issues.

Organizing with Grievances

- Create a communications network that includes every member. Options include: personal e-mail, text, an app, a secret Facebook group or even Twitter. The point is for union stewards and members—and prospective members—to be in touch.

Pass on information about all workplace issues, not just about official grievances.

- Share experiences. One reason that stewards in a local should meet every month is to create joint strategies and to see how our boss is dealing with the union. In unions with many work locations, stewards sometimes think that their supervisor has a nasty streak but when stewards get together, they find that it is a carefully plotted management strategy.

- Expand union visibility, both inside the workplace and in your community—make sure all your members wear union insignia at work—buttons, jerseys, even hair ribbons.

- Learn from stewards who work in Right to Work environments. (Unionist.com has some examples.)

- Finally, it is just a great and healthy union-building exercise to challenge management’s authority. Anytime. Anywhere.

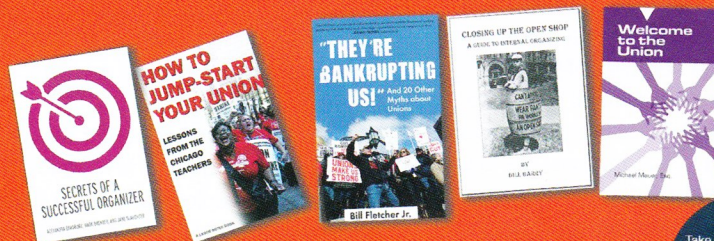
- Showcase solidarity: When you and your members pick an issue, make sure it builds solidarity, not something divisive

within the union. For example, pitting younger workers versus older over seniority perks, or anything that splits people along race, gender, immigration or geographical lines.

KEEP HOPING

Finally, as any steward in an open shop can tell us, it is often discouraging to have to deal with the free riders, but don’t lose hope. Just look at the numbers from the teachers strike in Arizona in April. There are 90,000 certified teachers in the state of Arizona but only about 20,000 (22%) were union members of the Arizona Education Association. When it came time to vote on a strike, however, 57,000 (63%) filled out a ballot and a huge majority of the teachers risked discipline by walking out of their schools. With some strong activity, participation in the union tripled! Build it and they will come. In fact, a great first-step assignment is to ask each of your co-workers what they know about the #Red4Ed movement (you can share the last *Steward Update* with them, if they need an introduction).

—Bill Barry is a retired organizer and labor educator and the author of the new book *Don’t Trump on Us: Making Our Unions Great Again*, from which this article was adapted. It is available at www.unionist.com.



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