



STEWARDS CORNER

Monthly Newsletter for Union Stewards

Cutting Through the Jargon

Take a minute and think about all the unique “shorthand” we use in the labor movement: CBA, AFL-CIO, IEB, MOA, NLRB, EEOC, DOL; then there are terms we use like “solidarity,” “grievance,” and “steward”! Most groups have a language they use to talk to one another, but the “jargon” or common language—which unites us—can often make others feel excluded or at least confused.

Let’s be honest—the Labor Movement has a jargon problem. In written and verbal communication, our messaging tends to speak to those already “in the know.” This prevents members we need to get involved in our Local Unions from engaging with us, and it can further alienate the non-members we hope to organize.

Think about it: the number of people growing up in Union households is shrinking, and Union talk around the dinner table is now a rare occurrence. Adapting to this shift in our culture has challenged Unions and Union members in several ways, mainly how we communicate with our members and the public. How many times have you lamented something along these lines: *these new employees don’t even know what a Union is!*

There is a reason for that. “Union density” (a jargon word that means the percentage of workers in Unions) in the United States was 10.1% in 2022 compared to 20.1% in 1983. Similarly, the Union density in Canada dropped from 38% in 1981 to 29% in 2022. This is a 10% decline in Union jobs across the workforce in both countries and a 10% decline in families at dinner tables “talking Union.”

Consider the number of new hires in your Local Union without understanding how Unions work or even what Unions are. We can’t hold this against them, but we can try to meet them where they are and educate our new members about their new-found rights on the job and what it means to be part of the Labor Movement and especially the United Steelworkers (USW).

Now, think about the members who regularly attend your monthly membership meetings. Do they talk about your Local Union, the International Union, your collective bargaining agreement (CBA), and the company in a way the average new hire would understand?

To improve communication with new members and avoid speaking the Union equivalent of “insider baseball,” consider the terminology we use.

Instead of:

- *The LU filed a ULP with the NLRB because management violated the CBA’s OT language.*

We could say:

- *The Local filed charges with the Labor Board because a*

company broke the rules on overtime pay.

We also tend to assume everybody knows what we mean when we use terms like “arbitration,” “Weingarten rights,” or “the International.” They don’t teach this stuff in schools. So, it’s up to stewards and activists like you to be member educators. One way to avoid losing people is to define insider Union terms. We can’t assume members know what we’re discussing, especially when using acronyms and abbreviations.

Instead of:

- *You’re in a Union; if there’s a layoff, you’ll get SUB pay, and the Local will start effects bargaining.*

Say:

- *You’re in a Union; if there’s a layoff, you’ll be eligible for supplemental unemployment benefits or SUB pay. That’s extra income from the company in addition to unemployment benefits from the government. And the Local Union will be able to bargain with the company to address the effects of the layoff on the membership.*

If a subject is important enough for you to discuss it with members, it’s also important enough to ensure they understand it fully. Ask yourself if a high school student would understand it. That doesn’t mean dumb it down and avoid complex subjects; simplify your word choices or define the “jargon.”

A good exercise might be to review some of your past communications and identify how you could have made them easier to read for everyone in your Local. Then, make adjustments that will help you reach a broader audience in the future. Have someone outside your Local Union, like a spouse or a friend, read over written communications to let you know if there’s anything they don’t understand or words they don’t recognize. This could make your Local Union newsletters and emails accessible to more of your members, especially the new hires.

The [January 2023 edition of the Stewards Corner](#) has a short glossary with definitions of commonly used Union words and phrases that you can reference and consider if there are terms worth breaking down for your Local Union members when speaking with them.

If you feel up for the challenge, you can even look at your contract and think about how to put it into plain language for your new hires and less experienced members. For example, how do you explain to a new hire how your grievance process works?

Happy MTCACLC day! That’s *Happy Making the Complex and Confusing Language Clear Day!*

Our Spaces on the Job

Space matters, and we're not talking about the Milky Way – that's NASA's turf. We mean our spaces on the job, places where we can meet, talk, and learn from one another, and spaces where we can share information.

In nearly every issue of the [Stewards Corner](#), we talk about your role in not only representing members but in doing internal organizing and building the Union. To do this, spaces matter. We need to speak with each other without management overhearing us. We need to build friendships, talk about our issues at work, share concerns, and think strategically about how we can make things better. For a Union to exist in the workplace, its members must have places to *talk with each other*.

We need to be intentional about our spaces for our mental health and the health of our Locals. What space do you have? How to protect it, and how to most effectively utilize them.

Where You Find Your “Crew”

“Workers’ spaces” are precisely what the phrase implies; they are places for workers to be together. Whether you work in a hospital or a foundry, do you have a breakroom or cafeteria... or at least a specific section of it. It could be the corner of an assembly department with a table, chairs, and refrigerator and which supervisors generally stay away from. Or, in many workplaces, it's the smoking area.

These are critical areas for a couple of reasons. First, workers use them to rest and recover from work, both physically and mentally. Breaks are a vital component of health and safety. At the same time, they're an opportunity for workers to talk with each other and build relationships. The conversations might run from “bull sessions” about sports to sharing pictures of kids, but they also serve as places where workers feel free to discuss their concerns and complaints. Also, it's easier for a steward to give an update about bargaining to a small group of coworkers than to deliver the same message four or five times individually.

Your coworkers are often like family because of the relationships you build on the job. This sense of family is an essential building block for solidarity and collective action.

Working Alone is Bad for Health & Safety

Workers’ collective spaces are also crucial for health and safety. Unfortunately, increasingly, work is organized in a way that isolates workers from one another – either physically by having workers work alone or with heavy and/or fast-paced workloads. Hence, it's hard to interact even in the same work area. This isolation can have serious consequences, including depression and fatigue, and is associated with increased suicidal thoughts. Spending time with coworkers after working alone might be the difference that helps someone get through a tough day.

Let's Defend These Spaces

As you can see, breakrooms and cafeterias are more than just places to eat. They are places to build community, share information, and swap stories; they are important to a healthy work environment...and Union. And they're mandatory subjects of bargaining. If your employer approaches you about moving, dividing, or creating new breakrooms and eliminating others, talk with your Local Union leadership immediately and consider what the consequences might be—a new departmental breakroom might be convenient for members of a particular department that has always had a longer walk to the existing one. Still, the new separate departmental breakroom could also lead to fewer regular interactions among the workers in different departments and erode relationships. The Local should consider this trade-off when responding to management's proposal.

Share the Venison (or something else tasty)

If you have shared spaces, make the best use of them. Many USW workplaces have kitchens and break rooms where members eat meals prepared by coworkers. In some shops, coworkers take turns bringing in coffee and donuts for each other, and you can bet that a lot of venison is passed around every fall and winter. **Good food brings people together like nothing else.** When people are eating together, they're relaxed and open to discussion.

If your workplace has a place where eating together is possible, try to get something started. During bargaining time, some USW Locals hand out snacks along with bargaining updates in break rooms and even in parking lots. The food is a plus; the real benefit is creating a space where Union members can talk, strengthen relationships, and build solidarity.

What if you have no space?

If there isn't a good spot at the workplace for workers to talk, then where can you meet? For some, it might be the Union hall, but what if the Local doesn't have a hall or it's a 45-minute drive in the opposite direction of where most workers live? Maybe there's a diner nearby where you could meet before or after work. There used to be a bar just outside the gates of the mill in East St. Louis called *Straight Home*—that way, everyone could go “straight home!” Finding a convenient place and time for everyone is a challenge when you factor in commutes and family responsibilities. And now, many in our Union work from home or spread across a state or the whole country. Maybe, your space has to be on social media, a Local Union app, or through texting. The key is that we need a space to communicate.

Let us know what you have done to create a space and/or community in your Local! Send your stories to Education@usw.org!



- ▶ 9/5/23 **Grievance Investigation 11AM – 8 PM**
- ▶ 9/19/23 **Mental Health Matters: How Can You Help? 11AM – 8 PM**

