

Tools for Success - Chapter 6: Sisters in the Brotherhood

Working with Your Union

Unions have been an important force in improving the welfare of workers, and they can be strong advocates for workers on the construction site. As tradeswomen we support our unions for these reasons. However, we also know that unions have not always met tradeswomen's needs, and that we have much work to improve them.

How You Can Help Your Union

Show up, network and volunteer, if they know you, they will be much more likely to support you. Be well informed. Get copies of your constitution and by-laws, and read them. Be sure to pay your dues on time, even if you are unemployed. Get involved in union committees. You can run for an elected committee, or you can ask to be named to an appointed committee. The bargaining and negotiating committees are good places to advocate for women's needs. Electing women to these committees or to other union offices is the best long-term strategy for change. Some unions have women's committees. If your union has one, you can join it. If it doesn't, you can work to establish one.

Women's committees work to:

- *Promote existing women's support groups, or, if there aren't any, to create them.*
- *promote women's leadership by helping women with elected offices in the union, and by working to have women named to appointed union offices,*
- *Prevent sexual harassment, and promote women's equity in contract language.*
- *for more information on how to form a women's committee, visit:*
<http://teamster.org/content/how-form-womens-committee>

How Your Union Can Help You

Union Grievances

Your union is obligated to represent you when you have a problem on the job. This method of dealing with a problem is called a grievance procedure.

Your union can file a grievance procedure about any of the following:

- 1) *Violations of the union contract: wages, hours, tools and safety conditions,*
- 2) *Employer violations of federal, state, and local law, including sexual harassment,*
- 3) *Violations of company rules,*
- 4) *Unfair or discriminatory treatment, especially in hiring or in lay-offs, and*
- 5) *Violations of past practices (commonly recognized procedures and policies of the worksite)*

If you want to file a grievance about any of these issues, contact your union steward as soon as possible. Explain what is going on and how you would like to have it resolved. Your union steward should then investigate your complaint. If your steward finds it is valid, he or she will then bring it to your employer, either informally or through a written grievance. Your complaint can ultimately go to arbitration.

Union Contracts

Unions set standards for wages, safety, hiring and working conditions through contracts. They are the basis for many of your rights as a worker. By participating in any part of the contract process you can work for equality for women and better conditions for all workers.

Contracts are developed through this process:

- 1) Members indicate what they want in a contract, in writing or at union meetings. Union members can do this as individuals or as members of a committee. Women's committees may be a group that deals with tradeswomen's equity issues.*
- 2) The union bargaining committee draws up the best possible contract language using this input.*
- 3) The negotiating committee bargains with management to agree on a contract, which must be ratified by the union membership.*

If Your Union Discriminates Against You

If you think your union has discriminated against you in hiring, in training, in refusing to file a grievance, or in disciplining you for any activity, you should try these steps:

- 1) Work within your union, talking with sympathetic members. They may be able to influence the union leadership.*
- 2) If there is a women's committee in your union, ask for their support. If there isn't one, talk to other women about supporting you.*
- 3) Contact a tradeswomen's support group for advice. Tradeswomen's support groups have extensive experience with unions and can offer both perspective and support.*
- 4) Contact a national organization working for women's rights
<http://www.uniondemocracy.org/Legal/handouts.htm#complain>*

Your union is required by law to represent all its members equally; the National Labor Relations Board, which has offices around the country, enforces the law. One of your options is to file a complaint, however, may have negative consequences, including retaliation by your union. Since retaliation is against the law, your union may eventually have to pay damages. However, the legal process can take years. Experienced tradeswomen and tradeswomen's organization say that filing a complaint is the very last step you should take after you've exhausted all other means to remedy the situation.