

THE STEWARD AND THE NON-UNION WORKER IN RIGHT-TO-WORK (FOR LESS) STATES

[State] is one of twenty-two *right-to-work* states. What does this mean? It means that the state legislature, a body of politicians elected by you, established laws prohibiting your Teamster Local Union from negotiating a *union shop* clause in the collective bargaining agreement. And, this means that employees at your workplace are **not required** to join the union!

NOTE: *This applies only to those employers covered under the National Labor Relations Act.*

Most non-union employees in right-to-work (for less) states believe that they need not join the Teamster because they already get the same benefits as their union counterparts - without paying dues! Some even believe that these benefits actually come from the Employer! They think the Employer to be a benevolent entity that really cares and only acts in their best interests; in fact, the Employer would probably treat workers better were it not for union interference. And, sadly, some non-union employees just think the supervisor to be a real sweetheart; so who needs a union?

These non-union employees (often called *free riders*) always carry with them a large litany of common objections, all formed by myth, stereotype, rumor, and the lack of information. (Often called ignorance.) Some will even admit that they know nothing about unions, only that "my old man says they're' a bunch of good-for-nothings who get paid not to work." People like this, may simply be out of reach; after all, some people still don't believe we landed on the moon!

However, others will be open-minded and easy to convince and encouraged to join. A sensible and rational non-union employee will most likely join the union if told the truth and heard the facts: that such preconceptions about organized labor is, in the long run, detrimental to all workers. Many non-union workers are more likely to join the Teamsters if they think it will make a difference.

As steward, you are the legal representative of the union. You are the daily workplace presence of the Teamsters. You must be ready, willing and able to approach one of your non-union co-workers and respond to any and all of their baseless objections to joining the Union. As steward, it is your duty to project a positive image, supported by facts and information that will make it clear to even the densest *free rider* the value of becoming a union member.

Following are some objections that you may hear along with some possible responses that you may use, many of which have proved effective in the past.

Objection: *Why should I join the Teamsters? I get the same wages and benefits anyway.*

- "You're right, but we could get more if the job was 100% union! Of course, we can only win more if there were more union members willing to work for them."

- “Yes, but if everyone thought that way, there would be no union. And there would be no union to bargain with the employer; there would be no grievance procedure to resolve problems that would keep happening without a union to prevent it. A union is about power; union power is about strength in numbers; strength in numbers is about getting everyone involved. Even if we only had one non-union worker on the job, we still have less power needed to improve our wages and working conditions.”
- “But non-union workers give more leverage to the boss, who only sees that some employees just won’t stand up for their workplace rights and many of the important issues (like improved health care) that the union negotiates. The Employer is less likely to improve our benefits if they think the union has less power; so, the more free riders there are, the less power we have and the less we will get.”
- “You’re right, but do you think this is fair? Why not just pay your share like us dues-paying members? With you just sitting on the sidelines, the members make less, yet are still paying dues because you won’t!”
- “Do you think it’s right for someone to receive benefits without contributing to the cost of securing them? What if your neighbor paid no taxes, yet still sent their kids to public school – and used public services? Do you think that is right? No, because it’s wrong! Just like it is wrong for you to enjoy the benefits of unionism and not share the cost.”

Objection: *I don’t need a union! This is a great place to work. What can the union give that I don’t already have?*

- “You’re right; this is a great place to work, because the union made it that way. You like your job because the union contract is responsible for making it so. You have paid vacation, sick leave and a nice pension because the union negotiated it for you. Your daughter / son is healthy because the contract provides health care. The supervisor isn’t abusive because the steward is watching. The employer can’t just fire you on the spot, because the contract prohibits it.”

NOTE: *Employees in non-union workplaces are considered “at-will,” which means they can be terminated for no reason at all (so long as federal statutes are not violated).*

Review the employer’s history; describe the wages, benefits (if any) and working conditions prior to being organized by the Teamsters. If possible (depending on how long ago) have one of the senior members give a first hand account. Discuss the bargaining history, focusing on major parts of the contract, such as the grievance procedure and arbitration. You might want to use a prepared sheet showing the union gains over the years. Also point out grievances the union has won.

- “What makes unions strong are their members. It is the members, a group of workers united to improve their workplace. A lone individual cannot adequately represent themselves; he or she is simply too vulnerable, and may not understand their legal rights as employees or members or may not know the contract. In today’s complex world, organizations of all sorts

are necessary to bargain with strength in order to protect employees from arbitrary treatment, to get better wages and pensions or more vacation and so on.”

Contrast the major differences between non-union workplaces and unionized ones. (The Department of Training & Development can provide a wide range of material to facilitate this.)

Objection: *I can't afford the dues; they're too high.*

- “You pay life and car insurance, don't you? These costs are certainly high, right? Well dues are like job insurance that protects your wages, offers security and permits you to enjoy a good standard of living. (And allows you to buy that nice car.) This is what your dues provides: higher wages, better benefits, increased job security, improved working conditions, a voice on the job and dignity in the workplace.”
- “It may seem like the dues are high, but try to think about how the money is used; for example, do you know how much it costs to negotiate a good contract or to take a grievance to arbitration?”

Remind the non-union worker that most of the dues money is used to support the local union – with only a small percentage going to the international.

Objection: *The union hasn't done anything for me (i.e. unsatisfactory settlement of grievances) or I don't like the people who run this local.*

- “Well, this is a reason to join, since non-union workers have no voice in who runs the local. The Teamsters are a democratic organization based the individual member's right to choose their officers, to decide whether or not to strike; members also have a say in what the contract says. Don't you want your interests to be heard too?”
- “Each Local Union officer, agent and steward does the best they can. If you are not satisfied then say something; otherwise, nothing will get done and you'll keep on complaining. Unions are organizations, and most organizations, no matter how effective, still have problems; but these problems will not be resolved until people raise their voice. After all, the union belongs to the members.”

Get specifics; identify those grievances that were not settled satisfactorily. Examine the problem, obtain facts and report back at once. Offer this concession:

- “Although the union makes mistakes, many grievances have been won. Many workers have gotten back their jobs, simply because the union stood up for them. Remember that our wages and benefits (such as flexible time, paid vacation, health care, sick leave. etc.) were fought for and won by the union - and are not gifts from the employer.”

Objection: *I'm not interested or I just don't want to join.*

In this case, it is becomes necessary to educate non-members on the reason why people join unions, particularly if the person lacks familiarity with unionism.

- “Why aren’t you interested? This concerns you – this is about your job. You can’t afford not to be interested, because what happens between the union and the boss affects everyone – even you. Contract negotiations, grievances, etc. concern everyone in one way or another.”
- “You spend so much time at work, your job representing such a major portion of your life. What happens should be of interest to you.”

Objection: *Let me think about it; I might join.*

- “Why wait? Why not join now? There’s no time like the present.”
- “Why not take this enrollment card and think it over? Go home; ask your wife / husband what they think. Here’s my cell phone number. Call if you have questions.”
- If you don’t feel like joining right now, how about attending our next membership meeting? You can really see what the union is all about.”
- “Our business agent will be here next week to meet with the Employer about some grievances. He/She would just love to talk to you and answer any questions.”

Objection: *My old man says [the union is] a bunch of good-for-nothings who get paid not to work.*

- “Why does he think that? Was he ever in a union?”
- “He heard it from his old man! So he himself has no experience with unions, then? Maybe he needs a union at his job, doesn’t he?”
- “If he has never been in a union, how does he know? Does he know that unions are responsible for the eight-hour day? Does he know that unions are responsible for most of our major legislation protecting workers – both union and non-union? Are you both aware that people have died for the right to join a union?”
- “It sounds like he knows nothing about unions. If he did, he wouldn’t say that. Union workers are hard workers, especially the Teamsters.” Maybe the both of you should attend one of our meetings and see for yourselves.