Sound Advice to Members: Be Pro-Active in the Union

You are a Union Member. You pay your dues and you do your work, but do you get the most that you can out of your Local 1546 membership? We're not just talking about the many fringe benefits like discounts on everything from car purchases to travel and scholarships you and your family are eligible to receive as a part of the union. Your union officers and your union representatives, who have each been where you are – working in a store, working in a plant, as a rank and file union member – say that the real way to get the most out of your UFCW membership is by being proactive.

Local 1546 Representative Bob O'Toole advises members to pay special attention to their pension and financial statements. “I would recommend members pay close attention every year when they get their pension statement to help plan for your retirement,” he says.

O’Toole also recommends that union members take the time to learn about their health plans. “We also need to be proactive about our health plans,” he maintains. “For example, if you are a Midwest Health Fund member, there are a couple of things you can take advantage of if you know about them in addition to your health insurance. For example, there are smoking cessation programs that help people to quit smoking.”

Union Representative Chuck Reiber believes that being proactive is about being there for your brothers and sisters. “Today’s work environment pits workers one against the other,” the long-time meatcutter says. “What I think the worker needs to do is not only protect themselves but also protect each other.

“I think a proactive member is looking out for their brother and sister. For example, when people get into conversations at work where there’s a comment of a sexual or racial nature or something like that, tell them ‘please stop.’ This is the right thing to do to help make workplaces safe and comfortable for everyone, but also it helps protect each other from saying things that can get them disciplined.”

“We can help everyone feel comfortable at work while also teaching one another what is and what is not appropriate,” Reiber added.

“The workplace isn’t like what it was twenty or thirty years ago. Today, if someone tells a controversial joke, it offends someone and they may sound the alarm.”

Reiber says that it is very important for members to know and understand their employer’s policies and to help educate your teammates. “Your job is your investment. Protect your investment,” he concludes.

Ken Swanson, another Union Representative and former journeyman meat cutter encourages union members to take courage in the face of fear, and stay in contact with their Union Representatives. He, too, has been where you are.

“People are sometimes intimidated, too scared to speak up but you need to when something wrong happens or you see something that violates your contract,” Swanson says.

“Whether it’s a scheduling issue or being asked to do something else that violates your contract, do what you are told by your supervisor, but then afterwards pick up the phone and call your Union Representative, call the local,” he goes on.

“We will be there for you. We will investigate and fight for you. We can often help but we can’t help if we don’t know these issues are taking place. Don’t just come to a meeting when it is contract negotiation time and tell us about something that happened years ago. Let us know as things happen so we can document them and start fighting for you. When you speak up, you are speaking up for yourself and you are also helping us fight for all members’ rights.”

UFCW Local 1546 President Ken Boyd also emphasizes the importance of being present and maintaining contact with the Local. “Don’t just show up at contract time,” he says. “Let us know when you see or hear of something wrong at work. Even if an issue doesn’t seem to affect you directly, you should care. By the time an issue affects you, it is usually too late.”

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