



November 2006

And What About Solidarity?

Last month, the lead article in the Labor Extension Bulletin was about “apathy” – what it really is (we think dis-empowerment is a better term), where it comes from, and what to do about it.

This month we want to take a look at solidarity.

Most of us know that solidarity is the key to a strong union – if our members won’t stick together, we can’t be successful in representing them. On a larger level, we need our members to feel solidarity towards members of other unions at their location, other unions in their geographic area, other unions in their company across the globe, other unions in their industry and, in fact, toward working people everywhere when they struggle collectively for respect and better conditions - whether they are in a formally recognized union or not. That’s a pretty tall order.

Extension Program staff member Charley Richardson saw an incredible example of solidarity when he was in Brazil a few years ago: "I met with the union at a Mercedes Benz truck and bus plant in Sao Paolo. Among other things, the union told me about the one-day solidarity strike they had taken to support several hundred workers from the Ford plant down the road who were getting laid off. Thousands of workers had gone on strike to express solidarity with workers at another company. It was amazing."

So why is solidarity in so much trouble here?

There are a lot of reasons for the decline in solidarity - reasons that would take more space to discuss than we have here – reasons like the overall individualism in our society, the breakdown of community, the attack on the programs like social security that tie us together, etc.

Union activists sometimes blame the members for lack of solidarity - for not sticking together. The members, meanwhile, often get angry at each other or at the union when things aren't going right - further undermining solidarity. But the blame game isn't useful and doesn't help us figure out what is really going wrong and develop a plan for rebuilding solidarity.

Management meanwhile is launching initiatives that limit or eliminate the member-to-member informal interaction in the workplace that is so critical to the growth of solidarity. These are initiatives that we **can** do something about.

Looking at Changes in Our Workplaces

Do any of the following sound familiar?

- New schedules spread shift changes throughout the day, taking away chances for members to see and spend time with each other in the workplace
- Electronic communication limits informal interaction during the workday
- Tracking and monitoring systems keep workers apart – whether they are in a call center sitting next to each other or on the road with a Global Positioning System (GPS) transponder in their truck
- Electronic control systems take people off the shop floor, isolating them from other workers
- Kaizen, continuous improvement, lean, six sigma and other restructuring programs intensify work ways that eliminate opportunities for informal interaction

Lack of interaction in the work place undercuts people's willingness to stand up for each other and stand together.

What can a union do?

There are many things that unions can do to build solidarity and to counteract the impact of the changes that management is making in the workplace. Some ideas include:

- 1) Analyze the changes that management is making to understand their impacts on solidarity and the ways they undercut interaction at work
- 2) Work on ways to increase formal and informal links among members
- 3) Build campaigns to force bargaining over the changes that management is making
- 4) Develop demands that counteract the negative impacts on solidarity
- 5) Come to our Continuous Bargaining class and learn more about the changes that management is implementing, their impacts on the union and the members, and strategies for taking them on. (See flyer on back)
- 6) Send us your stories about the changes in your workplace that are undercutting solidarity and what, if anything, you have been able to do about them.

UMass Lowell Labor Extension Program
Is Offering an Open Enrollment Training on:

**Continuous Bargaining:
Representing Members in a Changing Workplace
Wednesday Evenings - December 6 and 13, 2006
6:00 – 9:00PM
Location: UMass Lowell
Cost: \$15.00 for Two Sessions**

Do any of these situations sound familiar?

- Management is implementing a **“continuous improvement”, kaizen, lean, six sigma, work restructuring or team-based program** that involves a portion of your members in small group discussions about how to change the work process (they call it improvement).
- New technologies are being introduced that eliminate jobs, monitor your members, change skill requirements, disrupt seniority systems, intensify the work and generally increase your members' stress levels.
- Management, in the middle of the contract, is implementing new policies on absenteeism, drug testing, dress codes, overtime, schedules, etc. and when you object they say that it is their management right.

Our workplaces have become place of constant change. Every few years we bargain new contracts to protect our members' rights and their wages, hours and working conditions, but every few months or few weeks, management introduces new technologies, work processes and/or policies that undermine conditions saying, that the managements rights clause lets them do what they want.

These and many other changes are challenging our ability to effectively represent the members. The grievance procedure is often not up to the task of protecting the members in times of rapid change. Many of our members are becoming increasingly disappointed by the union’s inability to solve their problems. They are working harder, being monitored and disciplined, and seeing their security disappear, and they are wondering why the union has let this happen.

Continuous bargaining is a union strategy for taking on workplace change and forcing management to deal with the union about changes in technology, work organization and policies that are impacting our members and the very strength of our unions. This two-session hands-on training will help prepare your union to deal with management's plan for the Changing Workplace.

Light snacks will be offered at class.

Please pre-register by November 29th . Mail or fax, or email this form to Susan D’Amore; Labor Extension Program; One University Ave; Lowell, MA 01854 (fax 978-934-4033) Susan_Damore@uml.edu . Please make checks payable to UMass Lowell and send to Susan D’Amore.

Name _____ Phone _____ Union _____

Address _____ E-mail _____

Name _____ Phone _____ Union _____

Address _____ E-mail _____

Please attach a list of additional names if necessary.

These classes are designed for groups of members from the same local and/or workplace to analyze the changes in their workplace and to put together a continuous bargaining strategy that fits their situation. We strongly encourage Local Unions, where possible, to send more than one participant.