

# THE ROLE OF A UNION STEWARD

**Total Time—2 hours**

## **Learning Goals**

- Discuss the challenges and rewards of being a union steward.
- Consider the steward's role in building union power.
- Learn more about the role of the steward in all aspects of our union's work.

## **Sections—Time**

- I. Welcome, Review Goals of the Training—5 minutes
- II. Challenges and Rewards of Being a Union Steward—10 minutes
- III. Stewards are the Link—10 minutes
- IV. Ella's Song—10 minutes
- V. The Steward's Role in the "Union Triangle"—10 minutes
- VI. The Role of Union Stewards: Scenarios—30 minutes
- VII. The Day-to-Day Work of Stewards—20 minutes
- VIII. The Steward's Role in Building Solidarity—15 minutes
- IX. Skills and Tools Stewards Need—10 minutes

## **Materials Needed**

Flip Chart, Markers, Tape  
Copies of the Steward Handbook

## **Handouts/Worksheets**

Ella Baker Bio and Ella's Song Handout  
What is the Steward's Role? Worksheet

**NOTES****I. Goals for the Training—5 mins**

Post and review the goals for the training:

- Discuss the challenges and rewards of being a union steward.
- Consider the steward's role in building union power.
- Learn more about the role of the steward in all aspects of our union's work.

**II. Challenges and Rewards of Being a Union Steward—10 mins**

Ask everyone to use a few words to describe:



- The challenges of being a steward (e.g. stubborn bosses, inactive members)
- The rewards of being a steward (e.g. help members, get solutions)

Review the list of words describing the challenges faced by stewards. Ask whether they are a good summary and note additions suggested by the participants.

Explain how important it is for stewards to meet and share their approaches to dealing with these challenges.

Review the list of words describing the rewards faced by stewards. Ask whether they are a good summary and note additions suggested by the participants.

Explain that the reason for listing the rewards is to remind us why we are stewards and to help us get through all of the challenges.

Explain that stewards have many roles and that we're going to discuss these in more detail.

**III. The Steward Is the Link—10 mins**

Explain that many of the challenges people mentioned have to do with the common steward experience of being “in the middle.” Ask everyone to look at page 2 of the Steward Handbook.

Ask if this seems similar to the participants' experience. Note that while this can be difficult (refer back to the challenges they named), it's also part of what's rewarding about being a steward.

**Module Icon Key**

Flip Chart



Ideas



In Handbook



Worksheet/  
Handout

## THE ROLE OF A UNION STEWARD



As the connector, stewards truly are the backbone of the union. Communication between all of these different parties cannot happen without a strong steward structure.

### IV. Ella's Song—10 mins



Ask if anyone's heard of Ella Baker. Distribute the handout about Baker and Ella's Song and ask for volunteers to read about Baker aloud.

Play and/or read the lyrics to Ella's Song and ask how Ella's Song applies to the work of a union steward (answers may include "passing onto others that which was passed onto me," and "not needing the light just to shine on me.")

Explain that Bernice Johnson Reagon and the group Sweet Honey in the Rock composed the song, based on Ella Baker's own words.

For a Ella's Song video, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6Uus--gFrcvisit>

### V. The Steward's Role in the Union Triangle—10 mins



Pre-chart "the union triangle" (see page 6 of the Steward Handbook).

Explain that the union's role consists of all three areas represented on the triangle (representation, organizing and political/community action).



Ask what we mean by "representation," "organizing" and "political/community action."

Explain that "organizing" can be both internal—building the collective power of members already in our union, and external—helping workers to join our union.

Ask the group to think of ways that the steward contributes to each side of the triangle and write their answers in the appropriate area of the posted triangle.

Examples of answers: For representation, stewards have a role in accompanying members during disciplinary meetings. For organizing, stewards have a role in volunteering to talk to workers at locations that don't yet have a union. For political/community action, stewards have a role in talking with co-workers about important legislation or electoral issues.



Point out that the Union Triangle is explained on page 6 of the Steward Handbook.

### VI. The Role of Union Stewards: Scenarios—30 mins



Break the participants into small groups and ask them to read and discuss the scenarios on the "What is the Steward's Role?" worksheet.

## NOTES

To save time, you may want to assign specific scenarios (and to skip others) to each group.

Let the group know that they should select a reporter and have 15 minutes to discuss.

After a two minute warning, bring everyone back together and ask the groups to read and report back on their scenarios.

While there is no one correct answer for the scenarios, encourage the participants to consider what would best build our union's power.

### VII. The Day-to-Day Work of a Steward—20 mins



Ask the participants to list the tasks that stewards do day-to-day and chart the responses. Encourage the group to think about the scenarios just discussed.

Examples of answers:

- Accompany workers at disciplinary meetings with management
- Register co-workers to vote
- Welcome/orient new employees
- Serve as the “eyes and ears” at the worksite—noticing and investigating problems
- Update the union bulletin board
- Help to organize workers at locations without unions
- Organize workers to solve problems together
- Help to update the union office's contact information for co-workers
- Listen to co-workers' problems
- Educate members about important political/community/ legislative issues
- Investigate, write, file grievances
- Explain contract language to co-workers
- Help to mobilize members during contract negotiations
- Recruit others to become stewards/to be more involved

Note that different people will be more drawn to certain tasks over others.



Ask which of the items on the list contribute most to building our union's power. Ask if the participants agree that members are the source of our union's power. If so, then the most important role of stewards is to build a united, organized and involved membership.

### VIII. The Stewards' Role in Building Solidarity—15 mins



Explain that management may try to “divide and conquer” workers based on age, gender, ethnicity, nationality, race, etc., and that stewards can help to combat this tactic by bringing workers together across lines of difference.



Ask if anyone has tips for how to do this/strategies that they've observed other stewards doing and/or have tried themselves. Chart the responses.

Explain that language is often a challenge in bringing different groups of workers together. Since everyone deserves to understand and to be understood, stewards can help to identify language needs at the workplace and within our union.

As a steward, you may represent co-workers whose first language is not English (perhaps your own first language is not English).

Explain that the language tools we use to accomplish this are interpretation and translation.

Sometimes, it may seem like translation and interpretation are new ideas; but for over a century, workers of different nationalities have found ways to join together using these approaches.

Translation allows written language to be understood in another language.

Interpretation allows spoken language to be understood in another language.

There are different ways of doing interpretation, and some are more effective than others.

As a steward, you should discuss the interpretation and translation needs you observe with your union representative.



You can also help to build our union's strength by recruiting additional stewards who are bilingual or multilingual.



Point out that related information can be found on page 48 of the Steward Handbook.

### IX. Skills and Tools Stewards Need for Their Roles—10 mins



Ask everyone to list the skills (good listener, know the contract, etc.) and tools (copies of the contract, list of members represented, ABC cards, etc.) a steward needs. List the skills and tools on a flip chart.

Ask if there are items on the list that people don't agree are skills or tools that a steward needs, and discuss this as a group.

Ask the stewards to look at the lists and to assess which of these skills and tools they already have and which they'd like to develop/gain. Encourage an open discussion, noting ways that the local union can assist.

## WORKSHEET: WHAT IS THE STEWARD'S ROLE?

*In your small group, read through each of the following situations. List what you would do as a steward and why. Choose someone to report back to the full group.*

- A. Union staff are working on projects away from your workplace, such as political campaigns, organizing campaigns, etc. Members are complaining that they don't see the union representative as often as they used to.
- B. Members don't always get along. Sometimes, arguments or even fights break out between members or groups of members.
- C. UFCW members who work for your same company in a different location are bargaining their contract and they've heard that management's planning to push for major cuts.
- D. Members come to you with various problems, large and small, individual and collective. These may be suspensions or other disciplinary actions, paycheck errors, poor treatment by supervisors, new attendance policies, work areas that are too hot or cold, short staffing, etc. The members expect you to "take care of" these problems.
- E. You and other union activists where you work are looking forward to retirement within the next few years. The same retirement benefits do not exist, however, for newer hires. Many of your co-workers hold that the newer hires just don't understand what the union is all about. They say that the younger workers just don't seem to care.
- F. Many of the members where you work are recent immigrants. While some of them have exhibited courage in the face of management, many seem to be scared of speaking out about workplace hazards and discrimination.
- G. A new employee begins work during your shift.
- H. Your union has endorsed a great candidate in an upcoming local election—someone who was once a union member themselves.