

UNDERSTANDING OUR CONTRACT

Total Time—1 hour

Learning Goals

- Learn more about what's in our contract.
- Practice finding specific language in our contract.
- Discuss collective bargaining and the factors that go into contract negotiations.

Sections—Time

- I. Welcome, Review Goals of the Training—5 minutes
- II. Where is that in the Contract?—25 minutes
- III. Understanding the Bargaining Process—30 minutes

Materials Needed

Flip Chart, Markers, Tape
Copies of the Steward Handbook

Handouts/Worksheets

Factors that Affect the Outcome of Bargaining Worksheet
Learning More About Our Contract Worksheet

NOTES

I. Goals for the Training—5 mins



Post and review the goals for the training:

- Learn more about what’s in our contract.
- Practice finding specific language in our contract.
- Discuss collective bargaining and the factors that go into contract negotiations.

II. Where is That in the Contract?—25 mins

Ask the stewards to take out their contracts. Explain that you are distributing a list of questions about their union contract and that they will work in groups to look up the answers together. Divide everyone into small groups and ask each group to select a reporter.

Explain that they have 20 minutes for the exercise and remind them that some topics may be addressed in more than one section of the contract.

After 20 minutes, bring everyone back together (provide a two minute warning).

Ask the reporter from one group what they found for the first question.



List the letter for their answer on the flip chart. Ask if any of the other groups had a different response. Review the answers until everyone understands the contract language.

Repeat this process for each question.

Ask the stewards what else they learned while looking up specific information in the contract. Answers may include:

- It can be difficult
- More than one section can address the same issue
- Sometimes sections of the contract seem to contradict each other
- It helps to use the contents page and/or index when looking up specific language

Module Icon Key



Flip Chart



Ideas



In Handbook



Worksheet/
Handout

Note that there may be ways to make our contract language clearer/easier to understand in the future; we can note this and raise it during future bargaining sessions.

III. Understanding the Bargaining Process—30 mins

Ask if anyone has been a part of negotiating a contract before as a member of this union or another—and what this was like.

The bargaining process begins with input from the membership. Then, a bargaining committee comes together and presents the members' proposals to management. Management comes back with counter-proposals and there's a lot of back and forth. Eventually, there is a contract offer to vote on. Only members covered by the contract get to vote on it. Once the contract is ratified, it's up to the stewards to make sure that the company follows it.

Explain that through collective bargaining, union members join together to win the best possible wages, benefits and working conditions. How can we strengthen our bargaining position so that we can win better contracts? What are some of the factors that influence collective bargaining? The exercise we're going to do is designed to explore these questions.



Break participants into small groups and ask them to spend the next ten minutes completing the “Factors that Affect the Outcome of Bargaining” worksheet. Explain that if their group has a hard time coming to agreement, that they can report back about their different opinions. Ask each group to select a reporter.



After giving the groups a two minute warning, bring them back together and ask each reporter to write their group's numbers for each category on the flip chart (pre-chart the worksheet categories).



Ask the group to explain any factors that have different numbers. Distribute the “Factors that Affect the Outcome of Bargaining” handout. Conclude by reinforcing the importance of a united and active membership, and the role of stewards in making this happen.

Explain that it's also critical for stewards to help explain the bargaining process to other members.

NOTES

WORKSHEET: LEARNING MORE ABOUT OUR CONTRACT

Answer the questions below, according to your union contract. Note where you found the information by article, section, and page number.

1. Who is covered by the contract? Who isn't covered? (which job titles, types of workers, etc.)

Article, section, and page number:

2. Are working conditions/ safety and health mentioned in the contract?

Article, section, and page number:

3. Is there anything about shifts, scheduling and/or days off in the contract?

Article, section, and page number:

4. Is there anything that pertains to harassment or discrimination by supervisors?

Article, section, and page number:

5. Where is the grievance procedure explained?

Article, section, and page number:

WORKSHEET: FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE OUTCOME OF BARGAINING

Below are ten of the many factors that influence our power and ability to bargain strong contracts. Which of these factors is most important?

In small groups, decide how you think these factors should be prioritized, writing in a number from 1-9 for each (1 being the most important and 9 the least). Be prepared to explain why your group rated each factor as it did.

Factors:

Prioritization Number:

- | | |
|--|-------|
| 1. Skilled negotiators | _____ |
| 2. Non-union competitors | _____ |
| 3. Union's political influence | _____ |
| 4. United and active membership | _____ |
| 5. Percent of all workers in the area who belong to unions | _____ |
| 6. Ability to strike | _____ |
| 7. Finances of the employer | _____ |
| 8. Community support | _____ |
| 9. Non-union parts of the same company | _____ |



What other factors can affect bargaining?

WORKSHEET: FACTORS THAT AFFECT THE OUTCOME OF BARGAINING

Skilled negotiators

While skilled negotiators are extremely important, the best negotiator in the world cannot win a decent agreement if the union has little or no bargaining power.

Non-union competitors

Unionized employers respond to competition from non-union rivals by demanding concessions from the union. Rather than lowering standards, unions must organize non-union competitors to raise industry standards.

Union's political influence

The union's political influence can be used to achieve better labor laws, to block non-union employers from entering some markets, and to get elected officials to support the union and pressure employers.

United and active membership

Everything the union does requires united and active members. Employers at the bargaining table are influenced by the level of unity and support they see among the union's membership.

Percent of area workers organized

When companies bargain with the union they compare what they pay to what other similar employers are paying. If most other workers are non-union, with lower wages and fewer benefits, employers argue that they shouldn't pay more. That's why it is important that all unions organize in order to raise standards.

Ability to strike

While we hope to avoid strikes, the ability to withhold labor and shut down an employer remains a key source of union bargaining power. But if the employer can continue to operate during a strike by employing scabs (replacement workers), a strike loses much of its power. Sometimes employers plan for strikes so that they can hold out for a long time. They decide they will save more money by resisting union demands than they will lose during the strike.

Finances of the employer

It is harder to win economic gains from employers that are not doing well financially. However, even employers with good profits may decide to resist union demands or ask for concessions.

Community support

Especially in consumer industries, community support is important. We may ask our neighbors to not buy a certain product or to shop only at union stores that are not on strike. Community leaders and organizations can help by pressuring employers to treat their employees fairly.

Non-union parts of the same employer

When an employer has unorganized units that can provide the same goods or services produced by the unionized units, the bargaining strength of the unionized units is severely impaired. In the event of a strike, the employer can still operate and profit from the non-union parts of the company.