

Help your shop steward help you



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Have you ever been adversely affected by management violating the contract? Most of us experience this situation from time to time during our careers as letter carriers. Maybe you were denied leave that should have been approved, or improperly scheduled to work on a holiday. Maybe you were taking too long on the street according to their crystal ball, or they forced you to work overtime when they had overtime-desired list carriers available to work. These are all examples of contract violations that can and do happen.

What happens if a member of management incorrectly claims that you missed an MSP scan, that you took too long to deliver your route, or that you do not come to work enough, and they take some disciplinary action against you?

Fortunately, we have a grievance procedure available to try to right these kinds of wrongs. Most offices have shop stewards who are either elected by a vote of the branch membership or appointed by the local branch president.

Serving in the role of a shop steward is oftentimes a difficult and thankless job. Some of us have a tendency to take for granted the efforts they make on our behalf. I want to take this opportunity to thank all the shop stewards around the country for all your efforts and ask those reading to do the same.

Probably the most important role of a shop steward is to initiate, investigate and process grievances at the local level. Generally speaking, there are two types of grievances filed on your behalf when the need arises. There are contract-issue grievances, such as denied leave and forced overtime, and there are discipline-issue grievances when management improperly issues a letter of warning, suspension, etc. There are some basic things we can do to help your shop steward in either situation.

First, if you are the grievant, write a statement about what happened. If it is a contract issue, the union has to satisfy what is known as “the burden of proof,” and a statement can help your shop steward prove our case. If it is a discipline issue, management has the burden of proof, and a statement can help your shop steward in his/her efforts to defend you.

Second, if you are a witness to what happened, come forward and write a statement about what you saw and/or heard. This will help your shop steward add further sup-

port to our position in any grievance. If you are the grievant, point out anyone you believe witnessed the situation so your shop steward can consider interviewing them.

If it is a discipline issue, let your shop steward in on “the ground floor.” This is something that you and only you have total control over. If any member of management (or law enforcement) brings you into the office and starts to question you, and you reasonably believe it could lead to discipline, you should read the following statement, called Weingarten rights:

If this discussion could in any way lead to my being disciplined or terminated, or affect my personal working conditions, I respectfully request that my union representative, officer, or steward be present at this meeting. Without my union representation present, I respectfully choose not to answer any questions or participate in this discussion.

If you were hired within the last few years and joined the NALC at new-employee orientation, you should have received a business card with the above-printed Weingarten rights written out. If you do not have one, branches can order these cards for free from the NALC Supply Department and hand them out. It is important that all members know and understand their Weingarten rights.

It is not enough to simply have this card or know your Weingarten rights. You have to remember to exercise your Weingarten rights and ask for your shop steward *before* answering questions.

Under Weingarten, you have the right to know what issue management is concerned about and the right to talk to your shop steward *before* the actual questioning takes place. Your shop steward is not just a silent witness in this situation. He or she has a right to assist you during the questioning as well.

Exercising your right to have a shop steward present when you believe a conversation with a member of management could lead to discipline is really important. This gives you the opportunity to find out why you are being questioned and get some advice before questioning begins. You will also have a witness to what is said and have representation during questioning. This will help your shop steward by giving him or her the chance to begin defending you before discipline is actually issued.

The most important thing to remember is that only you can exercise your Weingarten rights. All you have to do is ask.

In closing, I want to thank everyone for the extra work this month during the Food Drive and wish all of the mothers out there a Happy Mother’s Day. Please remember to thank your shop steward for his or her efforts.