

Food for thought—and action



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Dine

The labor movement faces challenges—declining numbers and influence—for several reasons: changes in the U.S. economy, including a smaller manufacturing base; globalization and questionable trade deals; labyrinthine labor laws and rising employer willingness to exploit legal loopholes. And, all too often, labor’s poor communications efforts.

Labor rarely has a broad conversation with the public about why unions are as relevant as ever or about their key role in building a strong economy and an expanding middle class. Unions typically wait until there’s an event—a strike, hostile legislation, an election—and then send out a tailored message aimed at rallying public opinion and sparking action.

But folks won’t listen to your message if they don’t think the messenger is worth listening to, and that means doing the groundwork by informing folks about the big picture when you’re *not* seeking support for a specific battle.

Let’s be clear: This does not describe the situation letter carriers are in. You already have the public’s respect and trust by virtue of what you do every day on your routes. Further, our message is clear, consistent and concise. And many of you deliver that message with a grassroots commitment and effectiveness unmatched by other unions.

You are a model for what labor should be doing on the communications front.

So why am I raising this issue?

It’s worth putting things in context, and you should be reminded of the significance—and uniqueness—of what letter carriers are accomplishing. Also, because some of you are active in local or state labor federations, this perspective may be useful.

More importantly, I raise it because as letter carriers we constantly face challenges, and we can never build too much good will among the public and the lawmakers who represent them. That certainly applies now, in these politically unpredictable times; topsy-turvy times in which union steelworkers find themselves the recipients of lavish praise in a White House ceremony even as the prospect of service-cutting postal legislation remains a concern.

All of which brings us to next month’s food drive.

There may be no more compelling example of the value of letter carriers and our dedication to the communities we serve, of the importance to every American of the Postal Service’s universal delivery network, than the Letter Carriers’ Food Drive.

And no better opportunity to bolster the support we already enjoy among the public and those who represent them. Bolster, and expand it. That’s rarely been more impor-

tant than in this uncertain period, and with imminent elections (plus a rash of retirements) meaning that new legislators soon will be in the nation’s capital.

So when you write letters to the editor or otherwise speak to the media about the food drive on Saturday, May 12, you are not only publicizing an event that feeds America’s hungry, you also are helping to increase public admiration for letter carriers and for the Postal Service.

And when you do that, you make it likelier that folks will be receptive to our specific messages on maintaining the quality postal services they expect and deserve, and on supporting targeted reforms assuring financial stability moving forward.

Much of the union movement, unfortunately, may not fully grasp that connection, but you do—so please act on that knowledge over the next month.

A short section this month on words and writing, focusing on verbs. They’re arguably the most powerful element in good writing, but too often they’re deployed in ways that rob them—and your piece—of that power.

The most common misstep is to use verbs in wordy ways or even as nouns.

For example, there’s no reason to say “The senator is planning to...” instead of “The senator plans to...” Readers just want to know what the lawmaker’s going to do, so get them there quickly.

“She is aspiring to be a letter carrier” or “She has aspirations of being a letter carrier”—are better as “She aspires to be a letter carrier.”

Rather than “There is an expectation that Congress will act on the military budget,” write “Congress is expected to act on the military budget.”

“The teaching of vocational skills is important” should yield to “Teaching vocational skills is important.”

“It is unclear who the successor to the chief of staff will be,” is better stated as “It is unclear who will succeed the chief of staff.”

“He bears a resemblance to his uncle” is flabbier than “He resembles his uncle.”

Folks have limited attention spans, writers have limited space, so for everyone’s sake: Less is more. Avoid wordiness and get to the point; you’ll focus readers on what you want them focusing on.

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