

# Introduction

Whether you are called a committee person, grievance handler, or shop steward, your responsibilities are the same. You are the front line of defense for this union's cause and the rights of our members in the workplace. Without union grievance handlers, workplace democracy could not function.

Unlike other leadership roles, the grievance handler is generally the first contact many members have with our union. For some, it is their only contact. As an elected representative, it is your responsibility to protect members' wages, hours, and working conditions, and when performing your duties as a grievance handler, providing each worker with "fair representation."

Our union believes the grievance handler's responsibilities go beyond this and includes the responsibility to:

- Enforce the contract
- Handle grievances
- Be a role model for the union
- Educate the membership about their rights on the job

**Enforce the Contract** – First, you must have in-depth knowledge of your agreement. This means reading and studying it. It also means keeping a copy on hand for quick reference. While it is not practical to know every word, it is presumed you will know where to find pertinent information and answers to questions. The negotiated contract is the grievance handler's most important document. It contains the wages, hours, working conditions, and rights of bargaining unit employees. Still, management sometimes "forgets," "misinterprets," or "ignores" what they agreed to at the bargaining table. To help address these management violations of employee rights, the contract also contains a grievance procedure.

**Handle Grievances** – You'll need to fully understand the grievance process under your contract. Study that section thoroughly. Failure to follow the proper procedure can result in the grievance being thrown out even if it is legitimate. An improperly handled grievance can have lasting effects beyond the grievant and their complaint.

**Role Model for Our Union** – Even though we know all the members are the union, in the eyes of your union sisters and brothers and the employer, you are "the union." Make your members proud to have a representative that they can respect. Knowledge, integrity, discretion, and justice are the backbone of that respect.



# Introduction

**Educate the Members about their Rights** – Educating members on their rights can be a driving force to building solidarity in the workplace. Discussing issues that have presented themselves and our position on these issues helps to keep the membership involved and informed.

While it is recommended that we strive to resolve problems before they become grievances, this book is a guide to handling grievances. It is intended to help newly elected union representatives perform the many duties of grievance handlers.

The grievance handler has a full-time job, from monitoring agreements to conducting investigations and getting facts straight, identifying grievances, and processing them.

## **When It Comes to Labor Relations, You Are Equal to the Employer**

When you are on the job and working as an employee, you are under the direction of the employer and must obey first and grieve later when a dispute arises in the worksite.

However, when you are serving as a union steward or committeeperson and handling a grievance under the collective bargaining agreement, you are representing the union and have equal standing to argue your position over an asserted contract breach. You are especially protected by labor law to forcefully, passionately – but respectfully – argue your position and seek fair resolution on behalf of our members and to protect the promises set forth in our labor contract.

Collective bargaining gives members a voice and a seat at the table. With union representation, no longer are members subject to arbitrary management decisions and abuses. Through the work of grievance handlers, negotiated contract provisions can be enforced and given meaning.

Today, our collective bargaining agreements are complex and sometimes difficult to administer. Changing laws and legal interpretations of the union's duty of fair representation requires that you be prepared to give positive leadership on a wide variety of subjects, most of which you will find in this guide.



# Duties of a Grievance Handler

## Must & Must-Nots of a Grievance Handler

In addition to handling grievances, grievance handlers must be negotiators, organizers, educators, counselors, and leaders. They are the representatives that interact the most with the membership they represent. Ultimately, they become the face of our union to our members.

Skills are acquired through study and experience. Grievance handlers need guidelines and up-to-date information to make sound judgments and recommendations to represent their constituents properly.

### A Good Grievance Handler Must:

- Keep a complete record of all members in their jurisdiction, including their names, addresses, phone numbers, email addresses, classifications, seniority dates, and wage rates
- Know the contract, particularly clauses on seniority, grievance procedure, wages, benefits and classifications, and all sections pertaining to disciplinary action
- Know employee rights under federal and state labor and employment laws
- Know local union bylaws and the International Union, UAW Constitution
- Attend local union meetings and encourage other workers to attend
- Attend union education classes and share the knowledge with members
- Strive to keep the workplace free from all health and safety hazards
- Keep bulletin boards, information racks, and websites updated
- Check the dues standing of all members in the department/jurisdiction
- Reduce member demands for grievance filing over gripes by listening to their issue, explaining the contract, and working with management to address issues
- Distribute union information and literature to all members under your jurisdiction and get to know the members by talking things over
- Hold regular meetings with members to keep them informed and hear their concerns

### A Good Grievance Handler Must Not:

- Assume responsibilities of management
- Pass the buck or make false promises to members
- Discriminate or play politics with the grievance procedure



# Duties of a Grievance Handler

## Duties of a Grievance Handler in New Member Orientation

### Introduce Yourself to the New Member

- Make them feel welcome
- Learn something about the member and their family
- Give the member any needed information
- Tell the member how to contact you and ask how you can contact the member outside of working hours

### Tell the Member about the Union

- The benefits the member receives
- The location and open hours of the local union office
- The name of the local union president and other relevant representatives

### Encourage the Member to be an Active Union Member

- Offer to take them to the next Union meeting
- Explain how he or she can help the Union build for the future
- Provide the time and date of your next membership meeting

## Your Other Duties as a Leader

Along with handling workplace problems, another important duty of a grievance handler is that of performing educational functions necessary to the development and morale of all union members.

A good grievance handler will give all new members a copy of the union contract and will explain to them their responsibilities as union members.

An active and well-informed grievance handler will stimulate greater participation on the part of each union member and, thus, strengthen the union. He or she will develop leadership and utilize the ability of others.

The grievance handler will attend, and, in advance, invite the membership to meetings, classes, and special union events. He or she will also provide constructive leadership, cooperate in the distribution and communication of educational materials, and use bulletin boards, break rooms, and other opportunities to build solidarity in the membership.



# Duties of a Grievance Handler

## Political Action

In a fight for better wages and working conditions for all working men and women, a good grievance handler will remember that the fight doesn't begin and end in the workplace. Remind members in your jurisdiction that, in the words of the great Walter Reuther, "There is a direct connection between the breadbox and the ballot box." Discuss the fact that laws that protect workers, like the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA) or Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA), were enacted by federal representatives elected by working people who knew they would pass good public policy.

The grievance handler will stress the importance of political activity and participation to the members and discuss issues relevant to their lives to get them to vote for those who will act in the best interest of working people. He or she will make sure that every member understands the importance of the UAW Community Action V-CAP program and ask members to donate by signing up for V-CAP check-off or buying V-CAP tickets.

## Support for Members' Personal Issues

There will be times when members' personal issues that are affecting them outside of work also affect them while they are on the job. These personal issues can cause distractions, tardiness, and absenteeism, affect their job performance, and alter the way they normally interact with management and other co-workers.

Grievance handlers should refer members' personal problems that arise outside of the workplace to the EAP representative or others designated by the union to handle issues, including child and elder care assistance, substance abuse, and other matters requiring personal counseling.

If a member's personal issues are affecting their work life and they are faced with disciplinary actions, grievance handlers will be involved to represent the member. It is important to respect a member's privacy and confidentiality when dealing with management. You should not discuss a member's personal matters with management unless they have given you explicit approval to do so. We will discuss this further in the section, [\*Discipline & Discharge Grievances\*](#).

## Strike Education Classes

During a work stoppage, one of the most effective instruments we have as a union are education classes. Education classes give our union the opportunity to talk with the entire membership about our concerns, responsibilities, goals, and future.

The UAW Education Department and several other International Departments have developed workshops to assist in preparing Local leadership and the membership in the event of a strike.

