

# Steward Notes

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UNION STEWARDS ARE THE FRONT LINE OF DEFENCE FOR UNION MEMBERS IN THE WORKPLACE. STEWARDS PLAY ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT ROLES IN THE LABOUR MOVEMENT.



## On the record

### What you need to know about speaking to the media

Expressing an opinion is a basic right, but there are some qualifications on that right in the workplace. When it comes to speaking to the media, there are a few things you need to keep in mind.

#### **Know your employer's policies**

Many employers have a confidentiality policy banning employees from releasing information that they may have access to as a result of performing their duties, which would not normally be publicly available. For example, Alberta Health Services' Code of Conduct requires employees (including those working for another employer contracted by AHS) to protect personal and health information. Similarly, Government of Alberta employees are required to sign an official oath swearing that they will not disclose information that comes to their knowledge in the course of their duties without due authorization.

by Merryn Edwards  
Communications Staff

# On the Record *Continued*

Even if your employer doesn't have a policy, all employees are expected to uphold a principle called "duty of fidelity," which is an implied principle in all employment contracts and refers to the obligation of an employee to serve the employer honestly and faithfully. Making sweeping statements about management's incompetence to the media, for example, would likely be seen as a breach of your duty of fidelity and could open you up to potential discipline.

Be clear about the capacity in which you are speaking. Carefully avoid giving any impression that you are speaking on behalf of your employer unless you are specifically authorized to do so. If you are speaking as a private individual, keep it specific and based on your own experience. You can disclose your own

personal employment information, for example. And make sure your responses are factual. Don't guess in order to answer a question on the spot—if you don't know the answer, just say so.

### **Consult with your union**

If you have a concern that you think the public needs to know about, bring it to the attention of your union. Not only is a coordinated approach more likely to be effective, but workers who are participating in union-sanctioned activities are generally better protected from potential discipline than those who "go it alone." In fact, openly showing your support for union activities can trigger protections in your contract that are harder to take advantage of if you remain behind the scenes.

If you are acting in a specific capacity on behalf of the union, additional protections

against potential discipline may also apply. Union officers at the executive level are often called upon for public comment, since their positions of leadership within the union demand that they be able to speak to the media about issues of concern to members without fear of reprisal from their employers. But even union officers can face discipline – always be sure to seek the union's advice first.

AUPE staff are also available for comment on issues that draw on their particular areas of expertise including legal, negotiations, or public policy issues. If you ever receive a media request you are unsure about, the best thing to do is to refer it to AUPE's communications department. Communications staff can respond to the inquiry directly or direct it to the most appropriate person.



## HAVE QUESTIONS?

**CONTACT YOUR MEMBER SERVICES OFFICER**

### CALL 1-800-232-7284

Have your local/chapter number and worksite location ready so your call can be directed quickly.





# Solidarity you can see

by Merryn Edwards  
Communications Staff

At the start of the day on April 22 at Canterbury Foundation, an assisted living facility in Edmonton, the supervisor of housekeeping began attending to what she considered an urgent health and safety violation. The problem? Staff showed up for their shift that day wearing buttons that read “I support my AUPE bargaining committee!” She personally escorted several staff through the facility for meetings with the department head who confiscated their pins, telling them if they refused to do so they could be disciplined up to and including termination.

April 22 was supposed to have been the next day of bargaining for a first collective agreement at Canterbury, but the employer had cancelled the meeting two weeks earlier. Nursing and support staff who voted to join AUPE in December were frustrated at the delay and had come up with the button wearing day idea to put pressure on their employer to get back to the negotiating

table. They surrendered their buttons when asked, but the incident drove home for the workers why they had organized in the first place—to have a voice in their workplace and to be able to speak out about the issues they care about.

Even after you have secured a contract at your workplace, issues can come up from time to time when you and your coworkers may feel the need to show your employer that your solidarity is strong. But you want to make sure that any actions you take are effective and don't backfire on you by giving your employer grounds for discipline.

If your workplace is one where uniforms are required or where you are coming into close contact with patients, your employer may well be able to claim that wearing a button with a sharp pin is a violation of health and safety or uniform policies (although as Canterbury employees point out, the union pins are no larger or more dangerous than Canadian flag pins or Remembrance Day poppies which

haven't raised management's ire in the past). You may want to consider stickers as another alternative, to take the pin issue out of the equation.

When planning a button wearing day or similar action, you should be sure to check if your employer has any policies or procedures that may impact the action. And of course, as with any workplace issue, the best place to start is by knowing your contract. Many contracts will contain “union insignia” provisions that set out guidelines for the kinds of buttons or other union swag that have been agreed upon.

If there are no clear guidelines already in place, the best course of action is to agree if your employer asks you to remove the button. You can always grieve it later if you have the grounds, or rest in the satisfaction that your employer has already got the message. If there are clear guidelines that prohibit the wearing of buttons, it may be time to get creative: next time bargaining stalls, your employer may be surprised to see everyone show up with red and black nail polish on!



# Learning Changing Growing

## AUPE's core course scheduling has changed to serve you better

AUPE has streamlined the core course scheduling process to make getting your union education easier. Our new process makes our core courses more convenient, flexible and most importantly reliable.

Now the courses will be offered as soon as enough people are registered to take them, with the most convenient location chosen based on where the majority of registrants live.

Any member can take the *Introduction to your Union* and *Contract Interpretation* courses. Other courses are reserved for Union Stewards and Officers.

### To take your union education further:

- 1) **Go online.** [www.aupe.org/member-resources/education/](http://www.aupe.org/member-resources/education/)
- 2) **Choose.** Find a course.
- 3) **Register.** Registration begins August 18. Call 1-800-232-7284 and ask to speak with the course registration desk.
- 4) **Confirm.** Once a course has met the required numbers, a location will be chosen based on the postal codes of registered members and you will be contacted with the date and location.

Steward Notes is published by the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees to provide information of technical interest to AUPE Union Stewards, worksite contacts and other members. Topics deal with training for union activists, worksite issues, disputes and arbitrations, health and safety, trends in labour law, bargaining and related material. For more information, contact the editor.

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The goal of Steward Notes is to help today's AUPE Union Stewards do their jobs effectively. To help us, we encourage readers to submit story ideas that deserve exposure among all AUPE stewards.

Story suggestions for Steward Notes may be submitted for consideration to Communications Staff Writer Tyler Bedford by e-mail at [t.bedford@aupe.org](mailto:t.bedford@aupe.org) or by mail. Please include names and contact information for yourself and potential story sources.

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