



Changing the Culture

Union Stewards can act to end workplace discrimination, harassment and bullying

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THE COST OF DOING NOTHING

Mounting stress, increased absenteeism, mental illness, serious physical health consequences, rising employee turnover, decreased client satisfaction and plummeting employee engagement – the consequences of workplace discrimination, harassment and bullying can be severe.

And the problems are widespread. The Canadian Safety Council (CSC) reported 37 per cent of Canadian workers have experienced bullying at work, so chances are most of us have seen it happen or experienced it ourselves. The CSC also found 72 per cent of workplace bullies are in positions of authority and 62 per cent of employers advised targets of bullying to ignore the problem.

Clearly, ignoring the problem isn't working. What might start out as isolated incidents can turn into an ingrained toxic workplace culture, as those who perpetrate discrimination, harassment and bullying interpret the silence of their coworkers as tacit approval for their behaviour.

However, it can be challenging to convince members who are witnesses to, or targets of this kind of behaviour to take action, especially since the majority of workplace bullies hold positions of authority, and the behaviour can become normalized over time.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

When addressing these kinds of problems, it is important for Union Stewards to first understand how bullying, harassment and discrimination are addressed within legislation, the relevant collective agreement and employer policy.

LEGISLATION

Alberta's human rights legislation prohibits any harassment or discrimination based on "protected grounds" such as race, age or gender. Occupational health and safety legislation requires employers to provide a healthy and safe workplace. Although Alberta's current legislation

does not address psychological harm, an employer's failure to address bullying, harassment or discrimination is a violation of their obligation to provide a safe workplace.

COLLECTIVE AGREEMENT

Many AUPE collective agreements contain articles dealing with bullying, harassment and discrimination. For example, in the Government of Alberta Master Agreement, Article 50 - Harassment and Discrimination affirms "discrimination, harassment and bullying will not be tolerated."

EMPLOYER POLICY

Employer policies set out expectations for employees and describe how complaints will be handled. For example, Alberta Health Services' (AHS) policy defines workplace violence as "any act in which a person is abused, threatened, intimidated or assaulted in his or her workplace," and includes references to bullying and specific examples.

It is equally important for Union Stewards to be able to understand what definitions of bullying, harassment and discrimination do not include. Members may come to you claiming they have been bullied or harassed, when in fact they are actually unhappy about the

legitimate exercise of an employer's authority, such as assigning work or evaluating performance. Similarly, while Union Stewards may be called on to help resolve conflict between coworkers, such friction should not be considered bullying unless the behaviour is deliberately intended to hurt someone.

ACTIVE WITNESSING

Union Stewards can help to change the workplace culture by demonstrating active witnessing when discrimination, harassment or bullying occurs. Instead of turning a blind eye to the problem, active witnesses draw attention to the problem, offer support to the target and name the behaviour as unacceptable.

Dr. Ishu Ishiyama developed a helpful technique for active witnessing called Anti-discrimination Response Training or ART. The ART method gives concrete examples of responses designed to interrupt discriminatory behaviour, point out its hurtful impacts, challenge the offender to change course, approach other witnesses or offer support and encourage the target of the behaviour to take action.

Simple statements such as "Wait a minute," "I don't like what I'm hearing," "Do you realize what you've said is hurtful (or biased)," "You don't deserve to be treated that way," "Am I the only one who thinks that was an unfair statement?" or "You are not alone. Let's do something about this," can go a long way toward preventing isolated incidents from becoming a harmful pattern.

Always remember to document as soon as possible any incidents in the event that these kinds of interventions are not sufficient to correct the problem.

Union Stewards should also exercise caution when intervening to carefully assess and minimize any risk involved. For example, if you believe a potential for physical violence exists, you should notify someone such as security or police, who are trained for such situations.

In the case of particularly abusive managers, you may decide to quietly document incidents and gather more information before addressing the problem directly.

Defining Behaviour

Bullying: Behaviour intended to mentally (or physically) hurt or isolate. It most often involves an imbalance of power and a repeated pattern of behaviour intended to intimidate, offend, degrade or humiliate a person or group of people.

Source: Canadian Centre for Occupational Health and Safety

Discrimination: An action or decision that treats a person or group negatively for reasons such as their race, age or disability. These reasons are known as grounds of discrimination or protected grounds.

Source: Canadian Human Rights Commission

Harassment: A form of discrimination that involves unwanted physical or verbal behaviour that offends or humiliates. Harassment is a behaviour that generally persists over time.

Source: Canadian Human Rights Commission

PATHWAYS FOR RESOLUTION

Informal resolutions are always preferable if at all possible. If the problem occurs between members, it is especially important to try to solve the issue before it escalates into potential discipline.

Union Stewards can help to let a bully know that his or her behaviour is unacceptable and may be in violation of workplace policies, collective agreements, or legislation, and warn him or her of the consequences if the behaviour continues.

If that doesn't work, it may be necessary to file a complaint based on employer policy and/or a grievance to get management involved, or in cases where the offender is a manager.

In those cases, make sure you consult with a Membership Services Officer to share the results of your investigation and explain why you believe the problem is a case of discrimination, harassment or bullying.

TAKING ACTION

Don't wait until a toxic workplace culture becomes entrenched. Take steps to become an active witness and support members who have been targeted to confront the problem. Or better yet, act to protect your workplace against potential future problems.

AUPE's Occupational Health and Safety Committee has created a poster on workplace harassment and bullying that includes helpful definitions and resources. Your first step toward eliminating these harmful behaviours could be as simple as putting up a poster at your workplace. In addition, a helpful online incident reporting form is available on the AUPE website.

You can also continue your education to better support your fellow members. AUPE's Education department offers courses such as Basic Conflict Management and Occupational Health and Safety, as well as advanced Labour School courses such as Mutual Respect and A Culture of Inclusion that will help to prepare you to be an effective advocate.

Most importantly, always remember you are never alone! Help from AUPE is always available by calling the Member Resource Centre at 1-800-232-7284. ■

Become a Union Steward

Learn new skills, support your co-workers and help strengthen your union by becoming a Union Steward. Start by enrolling in the prerequisite courses, including Introduction to your Union, Contract Interpretation, Introduction to Occupational Health and Safety and Basic Conflict Management. If you like what you have learned in those courses, you are ready to sign up for Foundations for Union Stewards.

Prerequisite courses and Foundations for Union Stewards are offered at various AUPE offices from September to June.

Check www.aupe.org/training/ for registration information.

For more information or to enrol, call the Member Resource Centre at 1-800-232-7284.

HAVE QUESTIONS?

CONTACT YOUR MEMBERSHIP SERVICES OFFICER



CALL 1-800-232-7284

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





AUPE EDUCATION ONLINE REGISTRATION

It's as easy as a few clicks of a mouse!

AUPE strives to empower its members through knowledge, offering a full slate of courses to help achieve this goal. A new online registration system rolled out last year makes signing up for education courses easier than ever. Here's a quick look at some of the functions that make online registration a breeze.

Functions

- Enables you to register yourself in AUPE courses through the AUPE website
- Walks you through registering for courses and ensuring appropriate prerequisites
- Counts down the number of spaces left in a course
- Keeps track of your course registrations
- Allows for automatic waitlists
- Notifies you of new courses in your area
- Contains your education history
- Stores copies of all AUPE Education certificates

Getting Started

- Sign in to the online registration system available at www.aupe.org/training/ using your member number
- Select a course and date (the system will ensure you meet the necessary prerequisites)
- Receive an acceptance email a few weeks prior to the course
- Confirm your attendance and attend the course

Steward Notes is published by the Alberta Union of Provincial Employees to provide information of 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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Story suggestions for Steward Notes may be submitted for consideration to Merryn Edwards by e-mail at m.edwards@aupe.org. Please include names and contact information for yourself and potential story sources.

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